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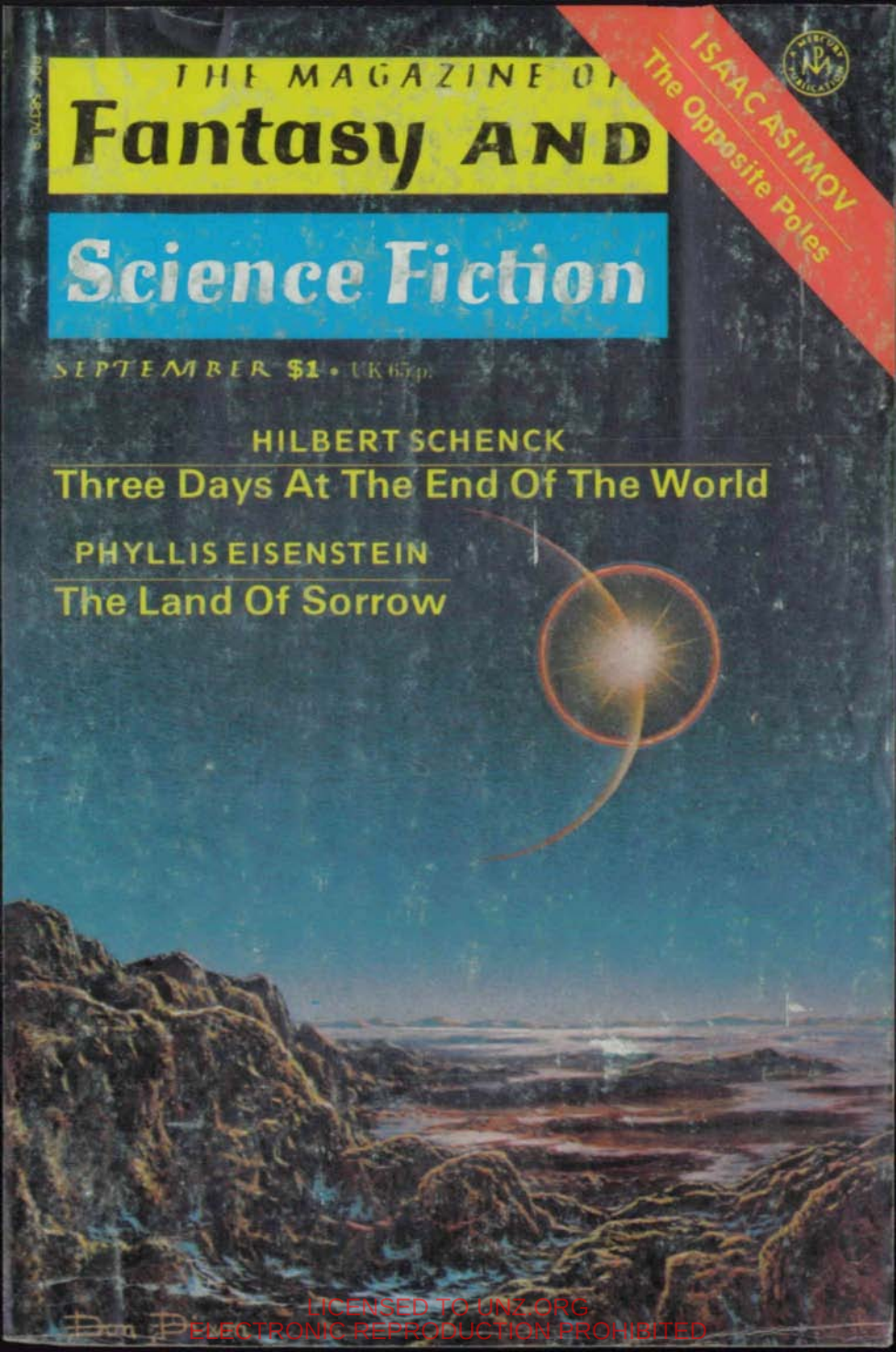

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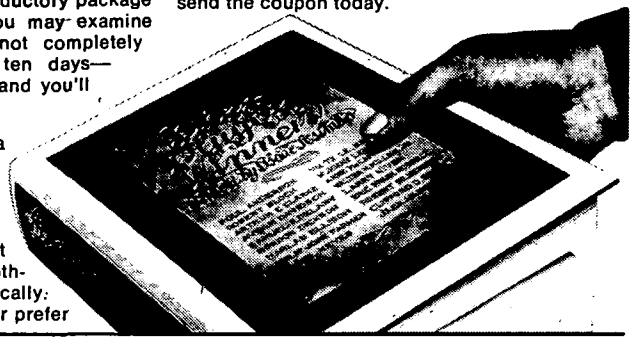

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NOVELETS

THE LAND OF SORROW	PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN	6
THREE DAYS AT THE END OF THE WORLD	HILBERT SCHENCK	70
LHUDE SING CUCCU!	GARY JENNINGS	138

SHORT STORIES

THE ARMAGEDDON DECISION	HERBIE BRENNAN	39
SHADETREE	J. MICHAEL REAVES	52
DEVLIN'S DREAM	GEORGE CLAYTON JOHNSON	66
DEAD MAN'S CHEST	L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP	104
ONE FINE DAY	ERIC NORDEN	118

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	ALGIS BUDRYS	31
CARTOON	GAHAN WILSON	51
FILMS: *Wizards, Garbage et al.*	BAIRD SEARLES	115
SCIENCE: *The Opposite Poles*	ISAAC ASIMOV	127
ACROSTIC PUZZLE	ROB MASTERS and REGINA HUGO	158

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s Eisenstein's popular Alaric series began with "Born To Exile" ust 1971) continued through "Inn of the Black Swan" (November and "The Witch and the Well" (January 1974). We announced its usion with "The Lords of All Power" (February 1975), but Ms. nstein has happily been convinced to continue the chronicle, and in new story, the teleporting minstrel visits . . .

The Land of Sorrow

by PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN

In late spring the mountains ere wild and windswept, the pass- treacherous with meltwater, the uman forage sparse. Beyond the eights, said the peasants of the outhern foothills, was land unnown: perhaps a vast, frigid desert, or even the half-legendary Northern Sea, where perpetual ice floated over the graves of hapless sailors. Alaric's curiosity urged him across the peaks, and his talent for traveling to any place he could see with his eyes or his mind saved him from becoming one more pebble in many a landslide. He was careful to take his time, to scrutinize his surroundings with a mapmaker's concern for detail. His knapsack was full of compact — if uninteresting — food, a thousand mountain streams provided his drink, and the scrubby trees of the uplands offered fuel for his fire. When he saw lowland birds wheeling overhead, he knew that the worst was behind him.

Through the final pass he descended into a wide fertile valley. Here, greenery was well-sprouted, grasses cloaking the hillsides, flowers waving in the meadows. To the east a series of cascades broke free of the mountains, glittering in the noon sunlight like ribbons of polished silver; below, they joined, settling into a river that flowed north and west until it broadened into a small lake. Beyond the lake lay more mountains, peak upon peak, a barrier to the north as effective as that to the south. During the winter, Alaric thought, the valley must be completely isolated from the rest of the world. He wondered if he were the first visitor of the year.

Peasant cottages, bordered by

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the varying tints of kitchen gardens, were scattered across the landscape. Near the river stood the fortification — Alaric made that his destination. Now, with the possibility of human witnesses, he eschewed the use of his power and worked his way downward with slow care. His eyes on the ground, on the two paces immediately before his feet, he did not notice the watching goatherd until he was suddenly surrounded by bleating goats.

"Good day," said Alaric, dodging a few butting heads.

The goatherd was a fair-haired boy of ten or eleven, dressed warmly in gray woolen shirt and breeches, with woolen wrappings round his legs and feet. He carried a staff, which he held out before him defensively. He barred Alaric's way.

"Are you guarding the valley?" asked Alaric.

"One of many guards," said the boy. "Stay where you are." From his sash hung a goat's horn; he put it to his lips and blew a long, thin note. From the west came a faint reply.

"I assure you, I am a harmless minstrel," said Alaric.

"I am very good with this quarterstaff," the boy told him. "Do not move."

"Not so much as a finger," said the minstrel.

Briefly, he debated vanishing, but that would mean returning the way he had come, and he was in no mood for retreat. He could hardly blame the folk of the valley for their vigilance. If any people lived in the mountains, they must be bandits, for no man could scratch an honest living in those heights: therefore, any stranger entering the valley must be suspect.

Alaric smiled at the boy, who did not smile back — he took his guardianship very seriously, that one, and his goats wandered where they would while he held to his post. Soon, a man arrived, and then another, both armed with long knives. They looked at Alaric and then up the mountainside behind him, shading their eyes against the high sun.

"Who are you? Where do you come from?" they demanded. "Who follows you, and what weapons have they?"

"No one follows me," Alaric replied, trying to smile as ingratiatingly as possible. "I am a minstrel, traveling the world, viewing its wonders. The mountains tantalized me, and I crossed them in search of the Northern Sea or some other marvel. I find myself in your lovely valley — a welcome rest stop, a source of fresh bread and meat perhaps, and lively company. I will play for you to prove the truth of my words." Very slowly, he unslung

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his lute and brought it forward under his arm. He tested the strings lightly, found them well in tune, and when no one made any move to stop him, he sang of mountain-climbing, spring, and a fair damsel waiting on a nigh-inaccessible peak. The men's arms hung limp at their sides while they listened, their knives pointing to the ground, but the boy did not alter his guardian stance; his goats wandered far up the steep incline, nibbling the fresh young shoots of grass, but he paid them no heed, all his attention on Alaric.

Alaric smiled sadly, in sympathy with the song, with its forlorn youth who could not summon enough courage to dare the heights and win his love. His listeners, however, showed no emotion; unlike the ground, they had not thawed with the arrival of warm weather — winter lay in their souls and on their faces. Alaric was sure of his talent. He had wrung tears from common men, from kings and warriors, from peasants reaping grain under the blazing sun. Yet here was nothing, no reaction, no back of the hand dashing wetness from a cheek, not even a face half-turned away to hide a pitying sigh. Stony silence greeted his song, and he realized with dismay that though he had thought he understood the hearts of men, he was still young in wisdom as in years. Not yet eighteen summers old, he finished the song with a discord and stood uncertain before them.

"I come in peace," he said. "Elsewhere, I have been welcomed."

The men's mouths turned down, and their lips tightened, wrinkling like apricots left too long in the hot sun. Their eyes swung sidewise in their heads as they tried to look at each other while still observing him. They had wispy, fair hair, parted in the middle, and their cheeks were hollowed, fringed with pale beard.

"Many a lord has set me at his table of an evening," Alaric said, yearning mightily that they would leave off this silent scrutiny and make some gesture, whether for good or ill. "I was thinking to journey to yonder castle," he told them, indicating the distant fortification with a movement of his lute.

One of the men rubbed at his jaw with his free hand. Then he said, "Come along," and he gestured with the knife as with a naked, beckoning hand.

Alaric followed him, and the other man fell in line behind them. The boy remained, standing on the rough track and watching till the three were well away, and only then did he turn to his goats, flailing with his staff and bawling them into order. Glancing over his shoulder, Alaric saw him scram-

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bling among the rocks like his animals. *Well, with practice enough, I, too, would be so agile,* he thought. He wondered if the goats grazed the very peaks in high summer.

Where valley met mountainside, Alaric could not tell. Gradually, the grass grew thicker and smoother, the rocks less numerous, the incline less extreme, until the three men strode along a level path well-beaten by human and animal feet, a path that wound among sparse trees and between fields tilled dark by the plow and spangled with fresh growth of beans and barley. It looked a prosperous valley, low stone walls shielding the crops from wandering grazers, houses neatly tended, apple and pear and cherry trees crowding out most other kinds. The men guided Alaric to a house that stood in the shade of an ancient, sprawling apple, and they bade him enter. After his journey down the mountainside and the briefer stroll through cultivated grounds, Alaric was grateful for the chance to rest his weary feet.

The two-room house was empty of humans, though there was a very young lamb swaddled in homespun, sleeping in a cradle by the hearth. Alaric assumed it was sickly and being fed by hand — in an isolated valley, all domestic animals were far more valuable than in the wide word.

"Will you have a bowl of porridge after your journey?" asked one of the men.

"I thank you for your kind hospitality, sir," said Alaric, and he accepted the bowl and spoon that were proffered. The porridge was cold and crusty, but not without flavor, for it contained more than a little honey. He had eaten worse fare in his life.

"You'll stay the night with us," said his host, "and in the morn go on to the Red Lord's castle." His friend nodded soberly, as if in agreement with sage advice. "We will go with you and present you to the Red Lord. He will be most generous."

"Very well," said Alaric. "If you wish, I shall sing for my supper here and then sleep well and long before presuming upon his generosity."

The men inclined their heads. "You may stay within," said the host, "and rest upon the straw if you will while we work our fields. My wife will be home soon, and no doubt she will be able to find one or two small tasks you may turn your hands to."

"No doubt," said Alaric dryly, and then he shrugged. He often happened upon cotters who felt that no song could pay for food, who loaned him an ax for splitting rails or a churn for making butter. Only in the great houses were his skills respected as honest recom-

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pense for room and board. He resigned himself to these petty cotters and their petty values; upon occasion, he felt guilty enough to agree with them. Just now, he was too tired to trek the final leagues to the fortification; as soon as the men had left, he stretched out upon the straw for a nap. Later, he would pay, with a song or with his strong back — what mattered one single day of labor, he thought, in return for the good will of his host, when tomorrow he would rest in luxury?

He drifted on the edge of sleep, and the voices of toiling men and calling crows and barking dogs intruded pleasantly into his dreams. At last, the soft sound of a woman's long skirt sweeping the floor nearby buoyed him into wakefulness. Without moving, he opened one eye the merest slit. In the late afternoon sunlight that streamed through the room's two windows and open door, he saw a woman moving quietly. She was stoking the fire with split logs, a pot slung over her left arm, ready to set above the flames. Heat had reddened her face and brought forth beads of sweat to dampen her white cap and collar. She was a middle-aged woman, coarse-featured, big-boned and fleshy. Damp tendrils of graying hair straggled out from under her cap, and she swept them aside from time to time with one plump forearm. After she finished with the fire, she picked the sleeping lamb out of the cradle and, cuddling it close to her ample bosom, began to rock it and croon a wordless lullaby. The lamb woke and struggled, but the woman held it tight and paced the room, swaying from side to side, as if she soothed a colicky child. She bent her head and nuzzled the lamb's forelock, kissing its curly-haired muzzle and whispering half-audible endearments between snatches of melody.

Alaric stretched, yawning loudly, and he sat up in the straw and scrubbed at his face with both hands. "Good evening," he said to the woman.

"Good evening, minstrel," she replied, and then she returned to her one-sided conversation with the lamb.

"Your husband said you might have some small work for me. I would be most happy to perform whatever task you might set."

She looked at him speculatively, and then, placing the lamb gently in its cradle and tucking the covers round it tightly, she said, "Sing a lullaby for the little one."

He glanced around the room to make certain that there was no human child she might be referring to. No, there was only the cradle by the hearth and the little creature that lay there, bleating feebly now and then but making no attempt to escape its bed.

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"If you wish, goodwife, a lullaby." He lay the lute across his knees and strummed softly, feeling a bit foolish. But he sang a lullaby. It was easier than churning butter.

She prepared supper swiftly and laid four places at the table, four bowls, four cups, four pewter spoons. She took a long loaf of bread from a cabinet behind the table and set it in the center of the board. Then she drew an earthen jug from some dark corner in the back of the room, and she placed that on the table, too, and then she began to weep, leaning over the jug, fondling it with her hands; she wept as though her heart would break.

Alaric put the lute aside, not knowing what to do, not knowing what had caused her sudden sorrow. He walked toward her, stopping with the table between them, and he reached out to touch her arm lightly. "May I be of some service, goodwife?" he asked in a low voice.

She looked up but she did not see him; her eyes were focused on some inner vision, or on nothing at all. Her fingers gripped the jug convulsively, trying to knead the hard clay, or to gouge it. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she lifted the jug in both hands, wrenched herself away from the table and stumbled toward the door. At the threshold, she lifted the jug high, as if consecrating it to some deity, and then she flung it from her, screaming curses. Striking the hard-packed path, the earthenware cracked into several pieces, and the pale fluid within splashed the ground.

The woman sagged against the doorjamb then, as if all the strength had drained from her body with that toss, and Alaric hurried to her side to support her, to help her back to the hearth and a stool. She leaned upon him heavily and would have fallen had he not been her crutch. She slumped forward on the stool, almost falling into the fire, and she wept, she wept, as if the world were coming to an end and she saw her loved ones tumbling into the pit. Alaric fanned her with one hand and held her upright with the other.

The men came in soon after — they must have heard her cries — and the one who had acted host took her in his arms and shook her, calling her name over and over again: "Aramea, Aramea." The other man tended dinner, stirring the pot with a long spoon and tasting the contents frequently. At last the husband took his wife into the rear room of the cottage, and then he returned for the lamb, delivered it into her care, and closed the door between her and the men.

They ate in silence, a stew rich in vegetables, huge chunks of dark

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bread; they drank water. Afterward, the men asked Alaric to sing, but they seemed hardly to notice his music, lively though it was. He tried to cheer them with bawdy rhymes and gay melody, but they were cheerless, moody, seemed to find the flames in the hearth more interesting than the minstrel. In the back room, he could hear the lamb bleat occasionally.

At full dark, Alaric begged their leave for a stroll around the house, for his digestion's sake, and for the privacy that nature's processes required. The broken jug still lay in the path — full moonlight revealed a sparkle of liquid remaining in its curved bottom. He picked it up, sniffed the contents: wine, a fruity, aromatic wine. He set the earthenware fragment back on the ground. He wondered what it meant. He thought it might make a fine song.

The boy arrived shortly, and he penned his goats in a wooden enclosure behind the house before claiming his own late supper. He eyed the lute while he ate, and Alaric smiled and picked the instrument up and sang for him. Of all of them, only he paid heed to the minstrel's performance, and his foot wagged in time to the music.

Here is an acolyte, thought Alaric. *He is like myself at the same age.* "Can you sing, lad?" he asked.

"I can whistle," said the boy. He pursed his lips and blew a brief, lilting tune that Alaric did not recognize.

"Can you whistle this?" the ministrel inquired, and he plucked a melody on the lute. The boy imitated it without difficulty, and Alaric repreated the notes, adding chords and weaving counterpoint among them and finally singing softly, and thus these two amused themselves for quite some time while the two older men huddled together by the fire and said nothing. The boy frowned his concentration as the music waxed complex, and sometimes he closed his eyes as if visualizing his own part, shutting out the distractions of the quiet cottage; he moved his foot, tapped his fingers on his knee to keep the rhythm, and even his head nodded the time as he whistled.

At last the master of the house — Alaric presumed him the goatherd's father — rose from his stool and, poking at the dying embers with a long stick, he said, "Dawn comes early tomorrow."

The boy hung his head a moment, his whistling stilled abruptly in midtune, and he sighed. But then he nodded slowly, not to anyone in particular, and he left his place near the minstrel to fling himself down upon the thick straw in the corner. His father's friend did likewise, and the father himself broke the stick he had used as a

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poker, cast it into the flames, and went into the other room, closing the door firmly behind him. No one bid Alaric good night, but the boy and the older man left him ample room in the straw, and so he settled himself and his lute and soon passed into sleep.

He was awakened by the heavy sound of boots tramping across the floor. He opened his eyes to pale dawn twilight and a room filled with babbling people. The cotters were all there, all talking at once, and the lamb was bleating loudly above the melee. Listening silently was a knot of armed men — five of them, in chain mail and dark leather, hands resting on undrawn swords, heads covered by brass-studded caps.

"We would have come," Alaric's host was stammering. "We would have come straight after dawn." His wife wailed wordlessly, standing behind her man as behind a shield, clutching the lamb to her bosom. The other man and the boy pressed close.

The leader of the armed men stared at Alaric, and when he saw that the minstrel was awake, he stretched out one arm and shouted, "You!"

The cotters fell silent as if their throats were cut, and they all turned to look at Alaric.

He rose slowly, brushing straw from his clothing and lute. "Good morn," he said.

"The Red Lord wants you," said the soldier. "We are your escort."

Alaric smiled slightly. "I thank the Red Lord for his invitation," he said. "I will wait upon him immediately."

"Give him some bread," said the soldier, and Alaric's erstwhile host scurried to gather a crust and some scraps of cheese, which he thrust into the minstrel's hands. "And a draft of water as well, for the journey." The cotter signaled the boy, who brought a bucket and dipper.

"Thank you," said Alaric, and he bowed to the family and to his escort before dipping up a long, cold drink. Then he shouldered his knapsack and lute and marched out of the cottage munching his breakfast, surrounded by armed and armored men. Behind him, he heard the goatherd whistling a familiar tune.

The soldier's set an easy pace, as if they were in no particular hurry. They had not taken his knife nor searched his baggage for other weapons, nor drawn a blade on him; so he felt safe enough. There was a sword in his knapsack, but he did not think of extracting it for defense; if real danger presented itself, he could always vanish. He understood the Red Lord's interest in newcomers, and belatedly he

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wondered if he should not have ignored his weariness and extended his journey to the castle instead of stopping the night at the peasants' home. He hoped the Red Lord did not consider his actions discourteous — there was a poor footing for a cordial relationship. He had noticed in his travels that royalty and nobility tended to be intolerant of faults in lesser mortals, whether such faults were real or fancied. He prepared himself to be as humble and charming as possible. He wondered if the Red Lord had a young daughter or wife; that usually helped in awkward situations. Alaric was fully aware of his own physical attractions.

He smiled at his escort and began to sing along the way, and to strum the lute, a marching tune he had heard among the young warriors of Castle Royale. The men fell into step about him, treading to his meter. They passed a few peasants, who turned to stare at the men marching to music, and Alaric smiled at them and nodded. But they never smiled back.

Has it been such a hard winter? Alaric wondered. *Or am I in bad company?*

The castle loomed ahead, pennants fluttering on its battlements, pikes visible on the shoulders of pacing guards at the top of the wall. The portcullis was up; Alaric and his escort marched past it, and it did not lower behind them.

Peacetime, he thought, seeing men-at-arms lolling at their ease in the courtyard, some half out of their armor, few practicing their skills against the wooden dummies that waited for mock attack. *Peacetime, but the peasants do not look kindly upon their protectors. High taxes perhaps? A small valley and many soldiers to support ...*

The keep was a massive tower, dark with age and pitted by weather. They entered. The Red Lord awaited them in the high-ceilinged central room, amid tapestries ancient and faded, amid fine furniture rubbed smooth with the touch of many bodies, upon a flagstone floor grooved by the tread of many feet. They followed that worn path to his chair.

The Red Lord was tall and gaunt and no longer young. His flowing hair and beard were blond — the blond that comes when red hair fades and silver mingles with the darker strands. His eyes were gray and cold like the winter sky, his skin as pale as ice. From throat to ankle he wore crimson cloth — tunic, cloak and hose — and his shoes were of red leather. Upon his right hand, a massive ruby-tinted gemstone shone like the eye of a serpent.

The soldiers knelt before him, and Alaric instantly followed suit. The leader took his master's hand

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and kissed the ring. "This is the man, Lord," he said.

Alaric peered up cautiously as the Red Lord turned to him. A scar, paler even than the white skin, showed above the man's collar — lucky he was, Alaric thought, to be alive after such a wound.

"Your name," said the Red Lord, his voice deep as a drum, carrying throughout the room. Alaric felt his skin prickle. There were other people in the room, men in addition to those who had entered with him, and their utter silence was a sign of respect beyond any he had ever seen. No seneschal needed to call for quiet in that chamber, neither before nor after the master spoke.

"My lord, I am Alaric the minstrel."

"Your home," said the Red Lord.

"I have none, Highness. I travel the wide world, seeking food and shelter where I may, trading my songs for bread."

"Why have you come here?"

Alaric bowed his head. "I wander, Lord. I have no reason for going anywhere, merely fancy. The mountains were there, and I wished to know if I could cross them. I did hear tales of a great Northern Sea beyond them, and I thought it might be an interesting sight. I had no pressing obligations calling me elsewhere."

The Red Lord glanced at his soldiers. "We found no other strangers," said their leader.

"I had no companions, Highness," said Alaric.

The Red Lord extended his right hand toward Alaric's face. "You may kiss my ring."

Alaric touched his lips to the cool gemstone, smelled a faint, sweet perfume on the hand that bore it. The white skin was dry and taut against the bones, an old man's hand, but steady.

The Red Lord nodded. "I will hear your songs at dinner." To his soldiers he said, "See to his comfort." He waved a dismissal.

As a body, they rose, and Alaric also scrambled to his feet. The master of the castle had already turned away to speak to someone else. Relieved, Alaric followed his escort out to the courtyard, where spring sunshine dispelled the chill that had settled on his heart in the chamber. The Red Lord was a forbidding man, a fit match for the mountains that ringed his realm, and Alaric could not relish the thought of trying to entertain him.

The soldiers led him to their own barracks, a stone and wooden shelter built against the castle wall. Within, straw pallets made two long rows on either side, each pallet separated narrowly from its neighbor by a naked strip of hard-packed earth. Above the straw hung

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weapons and armor and bits and pieces of clothing — every man's possessions exposed for all his comrades to see. Upon every bed was a pillow of sorts, either a wooden box or a lumpy bundle, and Alaric guessed that these hid whatever other fancies the soldiers might own. How they kept their valuables secret, he knew not, unless they wore them on their persons at all times. *Or else,* he thought, *they have none.*

The minstrel was assigned a bare spot far from the door, and his escort tramped up and down the rows, collecting a handful of straw from each pallet until they had enough for an extra one. They left Alaric to shape it for himself.

"You'll be called when you're needed," the leader told him.

Alaric nodded and dropped his knapsack where a pillow should have been. Although his own escort marched out of the barracks, he was not left alone; several men sat about, polishing or honing their weapons, mending clothes, or merely lying still upon their straw. Alaric was certain that they all watched him out of the corners of their eyes — he expected no less. When his bed was settled, he sat upon it, his back to the cold stone wall, and let the lute lie across his lap. He plucked idly at the strings. He sang a pair of songs about summer, and presently the sun rose above the castle walls, and a narrow, mote-laden beam laced through the doorway of the room. The soldiers seemed to listen, though they said nothing. When Alaric went outside to the courtyard, one of them followed him, to sit in the sunlight and sew a fresh seam in his jerkin.

Dust had risen with the sun. The courtyard was dry barren ground except where some horses splashed water from their trough. Alaric joined a group of men there drinking from a bucket. They eyed him incuriously and made no attempt to converse, though he greeted them affably enough. Unlike most folk he had encountered in his travels, they seemed to have no interest at all in the world beyond the mountains. For a time he watched their idleness, their occasional leisurely combat, their gambling with knucklebones, and then he returned to the barracks. Upon his pallet, the lute and knapsack still lay close together, but Alaric noted that the sack had shifted a trifle — they had searched it in his absence, as he had presumed they would. Now they knew that he carried a sword, but his unobtrusively probing fingers told him they had not taken it. Why should they? He was outnumbered a thousand to one.

He was not a warrior. He had never drawn blood with that sword.

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He doubted that he was skilled enough to do so. Sometimes he wondered if he ought not to discard the sword — it would sell for a goodly price in any market — and thus avoid the chance of being put to the test. Yet when his fingers touched it, memory flooded through them to his heart ... memory of two good friends and of his first love, left far, far behind. And he could not cast himself loose of this last reminder of the past.

He would not wear it into the Red Lord's presence. That would be bad manners for a stranger with peaceful intentions. Nor would it look well with his travel-stained clothing and worn boots, a heavy sword with fine, tooled scabbard. It was not a sword for a poor minstrel. Some would say he was a coward — and perhaps they had, behind his back — but he preferred to think of himself as cautious. He had never worn it.

He had washed at the trough, dusted his boots and cloak and tunic, run wet fingers through his hair. Now he waited. It was full afternoon before he was called to the keep, and he had begun to feel hungry.

The Red Lord's chair had been moved back and a table placed before it and other chairs added all around. He was seated already, as were three more men, and an additional four were crossing the room to join him as Alaric approached. An armed companion guided Alaric to a high stool set some distance from the table.

"When do I eat?" Alaric asked of him in a low voice.

"Afterward," he replied.

Alaric sighed. If he stayed with the Red Lord long, he would have to change that. A growling stomach disturbed his pitch. A light snack before — a slice of beef, a chunk of cheese — and then a fuller repast later were, to his mind, the proper form of payment. Too many patrons treated their dogs better than their minstrels, and here was another: several large dogs circled the table and were tossed meaty scraps by the dining men, including the Red Lord himself. Alaric tried to ignore the aroma of warm, fresh-baked bread and juicy roast, and he sang of the wild wind that blew upon the mountains. He began softly, and when no one bade him shut his mouth, he increased his volume till the rich tones of his voice and his lute rose above the clatter of dishes and goblets. The Red Lord looked at him several times during the meal, but he said nothing, only chewed with slow precision and drank deep from the cup that was filled and refilled by hurrying stewards.

There were no young people in the room. Alaric himself was the youngest by twenty years or more:

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the diners were of an age with the lord himself, and the servitors were only a trifle older or younger. Another nobleman might have a young cupbearer or a lively, bright-eyed wench to carry the bread, or he might have his children ranged about the board, listening and learning for the time when they would bear his burdens. *Well, the customs of another land,* he thought, and he wondered if later he would be called to entertain a Red Lady and her children. Or, judging from the Red Lord's apparent age, her grandchildren.

He was fed in the kitchen after the diners left their table, fed with the scraps of a sumptuous meal, and it was more than enough to stay the grumble of his belly. The cooks watched him eat as they scrubbed their pots and polished their cutlery, and they seemed to pass unspoken messages to one another — a lifted eyebrow, a nodding head, a shrug of the shoulders. Alaric tried to engage them in conversation twice or thrice, but they would not speak to him; they pretended to be too busy with their own concerns to hear his banter.

A soldier beckoned for him to return to the hall, and he went back to his stool, now standing in a wide open space twenty paces from the Red Lord's chair — the table and other seats having been removed while he was gone. He climbed atop it, his feet resting comfortably on a brace at knee-height above the floor, and he sang for the Red Lord, who sprawled at ease in his seat. Deep into the afternoon he sang, with none to interrupt him. The silence in the room was like a blanket of snow; even when men passed through, their steps were light though the floor was hard stone, as if unnecessary sound would call forth some harsh penalty.

Evening came, and as the light from high, slitted windows failed, torches were lit all round the room and flickering shadows brought a semblance of great activity to the chamber. The master of the castle lifted one arm in peremptory gesture, and a bent-backed servitor scuttled forward with wine. The Red Lord took a cup, then pointed at Alaric; the servant bobbed across the intervening space and offered a drink to the minstrel, who took it gratefully and saluted his host with the upraised cup before draining it dry.

"You may go," said the Red Lord.

Alaric slipped off the stool, bowed low, and headed for the kitchen. A light supper was being prepared there, and he snatched a share of it before it was carried out to the hall. The cooks ignored him, but a pair of soldiers hung about

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the door, clearly waiting for him, and after he had satisfied his craving for supper, he let them escort him back to their barracks.

In the north, spring twilight seemed to last half the night. Before the sky had darkened completely, Alaric was lying upon his straw pallet, dozing, his lute clutched safely beneath his arm. Beyond the nearest window, he could see a small sliver of pale western sky, and the evening star shining brightly in the wake of the setting sun. Few of the soldiers had retired yet; he could hear many men walking about in the courtyard, trading the last tidbits of evening gossip. He fell asleep to those murmurs, his belly full and his heart at ease. They were a dour and silent lot, these Northerners, but at least the Red Lord himself had an appreciation of good music.

He woke to the sound of a woman's scream. At first he thought himself dreaming, for the sky was dark and all about him sleeping men breathed softly. Then the scream came again, a high-pitched, wild shriek, wordless, distant, yet clear. He sat up. Beyond the window, a single torch on the opposite side of the courtyard glittered like a yellow star. Alaric picked his way among the sleepers and stepped out the open door. One pace past the threshold, a guard stopped him.

"Go back to bed, minstrel," said the man. He held a pike against his body, leaning upon the straight shaft as upon a staff.

"A call of nature," said Alaric, and he gestured toward the shelter that all the men used in common. The guard let him go, and he relieved himself, and then he heard the scream again. It drifted to him from above, as if blown to his ears by the wind. Tilting his head, he traced the sound to the upper reaches of the keep, where a dim light showed through half-open shutters. Like a tangible thing, then, the scream tumbled from the gap.

He returned to the barracks still looking up, over his shoulder. "What is it?" he asked the guard at the door.

"Nothing," said the man.

Alaric shook his head. "That's not nothing."

"A girl, then. What business is it of yours?"

Alaric looked at the man's grim face and said, "None. None at all." And he went inside.

The next day was much like the first, except that Alaric managed to snatch some food before he was required to sing for the master of the castle. An escort followed him wherever he went — not always the same escort, nor always a formal guard, but still he was carefully watched. His stool awaited him in

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the hall, and the same silence greeted his songs; he wrung neither tear nor chuckle from any in his audience, though he tried mightily. He received wine from his host and the same curt dismissal afterward; there were no compliments for him and no criticism. He felt as though he were singing to the forest, to the mute trees and the uncaring stones. The food was excellent, but he knew that he could not endure much more of this valley. He had yet to see a single pair of smiling lips. Sorrow hemmed him in at every side; though no one spoke of it, it was nonetheless real, bleak on every face and heavy in every step. For all the green buds and new blooms in the meadows, winter had not left the Red Lord's domain.

That night again, the screams, and as he listened closely, lying on his warm straw bed, he thought he could hear weeping after them, though it was soft and far away. And all around him, strong men slept through someone else's misery. He wondered if perhaps she were a madwoman — perhaps the Red Lord's own wife or daughter — locked in the tower and screaming into the night for some reason known only to her sick brain. A thousand fancies drifted through his thoughts; there was a song here, if only he could persuade someone to tell the tale.

In the morning he attempted to befriend the soldier whose bed was nearest his own. He was a man of middle years, though possibly a few seasons younger than most of his mates. He wore a beard and mustache, blond as his comrades, but above them his cheeks were unlined and his eyes only a trifle crinkled at their corners. Sitting on his straw, he mended a shirt, but Alaric thought his real reason for staying indoors was to guard the stranger. Alaric leaned against the wall and plucked aimlessly at his lute.

"Have you been a soldier for many years?" he asked the man.

"All my life," was the reply.

"I suppose bandits come down from the mountains in the summer."

"Not often."

"They must fear you greatly."

The man nodded. His skill with the needle was limited, and he sewed an awkward patch on an already patchwork woolen shirt. He stabbed himself a few times and swore loudly.

"Is there no woman to do that for you?" Alaric inquired.

"Not for me," muttered the man, and he persevered until the work was done.

"Has the Red Lord a lady?" asked Alaric. "And sons, daughters, grandchildren? I would know something of the man I sing for."

The soldier squinted at him. "Why?"

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Alaric shrugged. "For my curiosity's sake, nothing more."

The soldier threw down the mended shirt. "He is a great commander." Having said this, he retired to the far end of the barracks, ending the conversation.

Shortly, Alaric went to the kitchen, knowing that soon he would be called to make music for his host. He ignored the soldier who trailed after him and instead sought out a grandmotherly woman he had seen among the cooks on the previous nights, a woman he had smiled at often in his attempts to win a friend or two, but who, like her countrymen, never smiled back. He found her at the hearth, drawing a spitted bird away from the flames, and she was not so proof against his charm that he could not wheedle a crisp brown wing from her ... and its mate. "How will the creature balance on the platter with just one wing?" he said, and she gave him the meat on a wooden trencher.

He seated hilmself atop an unused table and watched the kitchen workers. At any other castle, in spite of the presence of a stranger, they would be chattering as they moved through their tasks. All the gossip of the tightly knit castle society would float through the kitchen; no one would be spared, from the highest to the lowest. Alaric had seen that often enough that he always repaired to the kitchen to have his curiosity satisfied. Yet here was quiet, save for a few cooking instructions or a curse if someone sliced a finger instead of a carrot. He wondered if they feared foreigners so much that they kept silence rather than reveal their petty secrets to him ... or if they merely never spoke. A strange, dead kitchen it was, and the blaze on the hearth was cold in spirit if not in essence.

He was called, as he knew he would be, and he found himself reluctant to go into the large cold hall and face the large cold man. He went, of course, in spite of that reluctance, for he owed the Red Lord songs in return for his hospitality, for the very meat he had just eaten. And there was nothing to keep him in that kitchen.

As the afternoon waned, his decision formed itself: no longer would Alaric the minstrel remain in this land of sorrow. He had had enough — enough to last him well into the summer, enough to bring back his own sorrows, which he had hoped to put aside with travel. He sang the better for his decision, to give the Red Lord full measure, to leave him well-satisfied and perhaps a bit wistful for more, to leave behind him the tale of a charming young minstrel with a silver voice. Though he wondered if they saw him so. He wondered if, wrapped in

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their own private winter, they perceived any breath of spring.

At dusk he saw the Red Lord shift in his chair, and Alaric left his stool to fall to his knees before his host could utter words of dismissal. "My Lord," he murmured.

"What is it, minstrel?"

"Lord, I beg leave to continue my journey with the rising sun."

"Your journey?"

"Lord, I would see lands farther north while the season is fair and then return southward for the winter. As I told you when I came, I seek the Northern Sea and as many other new sights as my life will allow. I never stay long anywhere."

The Red Lord fingered his beard. "The northern passes are scarcely clear. The way is rugged. More mountains bar your path. You would be wise to bide a while with us."

Alaric bowed his head. "Lord, if my songs have pleased you, I am happy; yet the wild wind calls me and I would go."

"Your songs have pleased me, minstrel. I had hopes that you would sing them longer than these few days."

Alaric said nothing but only bowed lower.

The Red Lord rose from his chair. "I would gift you, minstrel, before you leave. Come with me now, if you are bound to go, and receive a fit reward."

Alaric climbed slowly to his feet. "I need no reward beyond your kind hospitality, Lord," he said. "I have eaten and slept well. I ask no more of the world."

"You must come," he said in a voice that brooked no denial.

Alaric slung the lute across his back. "If you insist, Lord, let it be something small, for I prefer to travel light." He wondered: Gold? Jewels? What wealth could this isolated valley boast that would be easily portable?

The Red Lord turned and with a gesture bade the minstrel follow. Behind them the ever-present escort trailed. At one end of the room was the stone stairway that curved upward along the wall of the keep; the Red Lord climbed, and guards on the steps lit torches as he approached, standing aside for his passage. At the top of the steps a guard bowed and opened an iron-bound wooden door for his master, and the party passed through that into the upper chambers of the keep, a ring of small rooms about the central tower.

One of the escort kindled a torch in the first room.

"Here we have silver," the Red Lord said. Chests of every size and shape were heaped upon the floor, wooden, bronze, brass and iron, each with a massive lock upon its face. "Open these containers and you will find dishes and goblets,

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candelabras and mirrors and ornaments of many kinds. I count silver the least of my treasures."

A soldier strode ahead to open a door at the far end of the chamber and reveal another room. Here were more chests, though not so many by half as in the first.

"More precious by far is gold," said the Red Lord, and he nodded at the coffers as he passed them, as if they were old friends.

Another door, another room, and a single brass-bound trunk in the center of the floor.

"Jewels," said the Red Lord. "We have few of these, yet their value is above that of all the silver and gold before them." He glanced at Alaric, who made no comment, and then he paused by the door in the far wall of this chamber. From his tunic he drew a key. "And, beyond, the greatest treasure of them all." He turned the key in the lock and pulled the massive panel open with his own hands. The soldiers crowded behind Alaric, as if they, too, wished to see the greatest treasure, and he found himself leaning forward with their pressure, his heart beating expectantly.

A woman.

She was young and might have been comely before her face was bruised. Her skin might have been fair and flawless before it was torn. Her limbs might have been lithe and straight before they were broken. Naked, filthy, smeared and crusted with dried and drying blood, she hung slack in manacles bolted to the stone wall.

Alaric shrank back involuntarily, but the soldiers were there and kept him from going far. *This*, he thought, *this is the woman who screamed.*

The Red Lord approached her till he stood at arm's length, and then he stretched his hand out to stroke her cheek. The gesture would have been a caress in other circumstances; now it was a grotesque parody of affection. At his touch, she moaned and opened her eyes. No, only one eye opened — Alaric felt his stomach rising to his throat as he realized that the other eye was a newly empty socket.

"No more, Lord," she whispered. Her feeble voice was loud in the small room, at least to Alaric's ears. "I beg you, let me die."

He took the jeweled dagger from his belt and, as Alaric watched in horror, scraped the point across her bare shoulder, drawing a deep and ragged gouge. Bright blood welled out of the wound and ran down her arm and breast; on her torso it was quickly lost among the marks of other injuries.

"Please," she moaned, her lips scarcely moving. "Please, my lord."

The Red Lord turned to Alaric, his mouth curved into a cold smile.

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"Blood," he said. "The greatest treasure."

Alaric found his voice after a long moment. "What has she done, my Lord?"

"Nothing."

"Then ... then why is she here?"

"She is mine," said the Red Lord. "There need be no other reason." He touched the woman's blood-encrusted hair, wound his fingers in the strands and pulled her head sharply upright. A scabbed-over cut on her neck broke open at the jerk, and more crimson flowed across her flesh. When she moaned, he said, "Have you already forgotten how to scream?"

The woman fainted instead of answering.

He turned back to the minstrel. "Do you pity her, boy?"

Alaric could see the soldiers from the corner of his eye. They stood erect, swords and daggers sheathed; they stood between him and the only door. A single, half-shuttered window admitted night air to the room, which now seemed too stuffy for Alaric's taste. A scant arm's length away, the Red Lord toyed with his dagger.

"I would pity any wounded creature," said Alaric.

"You shall have ample time to practice your pity," said the Red Lord. He nodded at the soldiers. "Shackle him."

As they grasped Alaric's arms, snatched the knife from his belt and the lute from his back, he cried out, "My lord, I have done nothing to deserve this!"

"When you entered my valley, you became mine," said the Red Lord. "I do with you as I will."

Alaric let the soldiers chain him to the wall beside the woman, perceiving that they would offer him no violence if he offered none to them. Indeed, they were gentle, as if they fastened bracelets of gold to his wrists instead of iron. Alaric did not watch them lock the manacles; he knew no metal in the world could hold him without his consent. Instead, he looked to the master of the castle.

"My lord, this is a poor reward for one who has done his best to please you."

The Red Lord sheathed his dagger. "Your reward, minstrel, shall be that you will not be touched until this other one is dead." He slapped her face with the back of his hand, but she did not stir. Only her hoarse breathing showed her to be alive. "Tomorrow, perhaps, or the next day." He slapped her again, harder, and she moaned. "Do not sleep," he said to her. "We have an appointment later tonight." He gestured to his soldiers, and the entire party went out, shutting the door behind them and leaving Alaric and the woman in darkness.

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Beyond the window, the moon had already risen high, flooding the courtyard with its pale light, and even sending a shaft through the half-open shutter. Alaric's eyes adapted to the dimness quickly, and then he moved in his special way, only a short distance, leaving empty manacles dangling upon the wall.

Lightly, he touched the woman. "I will take you away from here," he said. As gently as he could, he lifted her free of the floor and pulled her as far from the wall as her shackles allowed. She gasped, "No, please, no," and then he had freed her and journeyed, all in a heartbeat, to a niche on the mountainside. There he laid her on a grassy spot, on the spot where the goatherd had stopped him and he had waited so long for two men to answer the boy's horn. Her body trembled and she clutched feebly at the air. He let her take his hands. Bending low over her face, he said, "He shall not touch you again." He could scarcely discern her ruined features, so softened were they by moonlight, yet they were graven in his memory; he knew that he would see them in his dreams for all the days of his life. *Where can I go?* She could not be taken to her own people, whoever they were — the Red Lord would surely look there first, come midnight and his pleasure spoiled. As a minstrel, Alaric had been welcomed into many houses, of high station and low — in his mind, the years unrolled, and the miles, as he selected among them. There had been kind hearts along the way, and good wishes for his travels; now he would have to bring some well-wisher the true tragedy and not merely the song.

He began to slip his arms beneath her, to lift her for the journey, but she stopped him with a gasp. "Please, don't move me."

Gently, he pulled away. "Rest if you wish, before we travel on. We have a little time."

She turned her head slowly, to fix him with her good eye. "Who are you?" she whispered.

"I am Alaric, a minstrel. A stranger. I was able to free you. You are safe now."

"He will find us. He will take us back."

"He will never find us. I know a way to leave this valley that none can follow. Trust me. I will take you to a warm bed and kind friends who will nurse you back to health."

For a moment she was silent, then her voice came so soft that he had to bend ever closer to hear her words, and the stink of her festering wounds turned his stomach as he listened. "No one has every escaped this valley."

"I can."

"Travelers who come out of the mountains. Bandits and merchants

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alike. Whole caravans." Her breath came fast and shallow, as if the sheer effort of speaking exhausted her. "He takes them to the tower room. None survive."

He touched her hair gently. "But you — you are one of his own people."

"In a long winter ... he becomes restless. Then we must serve his pleasure."

"What sort of lord is this," cried Alaric, "who destroys those he is bound to protect?"

"He pays for us with wine."

He remembered the cotter woman and the jug of wine she smashed. Was the lamb a feeble replacement for some child lost to her lord? Alaric shivered, though the night air was still warm enough. "Why have you not risen up and killed this man?"

She sighed, a long shuddering sigh. "It is good wine."

He looked back over his shoulder. In the moonlight, he could barely discern the castle, standing dark by the silver glimmer of the river. How long, he wondered, had it been going on? Why had no peasant assassinated this monster? Were his soldiers so fanatically loyal that they could stand by and watch their innocent countrymen — perhaps members of their own families — tortured to death?

"We must not stay here," he said. Once more he slipped his hands beneath her body.

Her arms fluttered weakly against his chest. "No, no," she begged. "Don't move me."

"Good woman, I must move you a little."

"No, no, I cannot ... I cannot bear it." Her breath came hoarsely now, and it gurgled in her throat. "Stranger, please ... just one boon."

"I will do whatever I can for you."

Her right hand groped toward him, so he caught it in his own; that seemed to satisfy her, for she let it lie limp in his grasp. "I am broken ... inside," she whispered. "There is too much pain. Too much. Stranger, I beg you ... kill me."

Alaric could feel his heart shrink back in his chest. "Let me take you to friends," he said quickly, "to good and kindly help. You will be well again —"

"No. I will die. Let it be quick."

"No, no, I cannot."

"Please." Her head rocked slowly from side to side. "Please, let it be quick."

He clutched her hand tightly, his whole body trembling. *No,* he told himself. *No. No.*

She moaned. "Would you let a mortally wounded creature suffer? Give me a knife and I will do the deed myself."

"I have no knife!" he cried.

"Then you must do it with your hands. Your strong hands."

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Hot tears spilled down his cheeks. His fingers had no strength. How could they lock about her slender neck? How could they squeeze until she breathed no more? He, who had never killed in anger — how could he now kill in compassion?

"Your strong hands," she murmured. "Oh, please ..."

And then he remembered the sword. Wrapped in his knapsack, it might still lie on his pallet in the barracks. And if not, there were swords a-plenty hanging on the walls. The sky was full dark, the men probably swaddled in their individual blankets and snoring. In the barracks he would be a shadow among shadows. He stepped back among the boulders, that his abrupt disappearance might not frighten her. Then he was within the castle walls once more.

His pallet was gone, the space it had occupied empty, its straw probably redivided among the other beds. But in the corner lay his property, all he owned in the world now; he clutched the bundle and vanished. The noise of his exit, the clap of air rushing to fill the void where his body had been, would probably wake them all, but he cared not — they were too far behind to catch him.

On the mountainside once more, he drew the sword from its scabbard. Moonlight glinted off the polished blade; since he had owned it, the sword had never drunk human blood. He looked down at the woman, saw moisture sparkle in her single eye.

"Strike," she said, and the word was loud as thunder to his ears.

Standing above her, the sword clutched like a great dagger in his two hands, he drove the point into her breast, felt the breastbone cleave beneath his weight, felt the heart yield and the spine snap ... and then hard earth resisted him. His whole body shuddered for a moment, and he fought to clear his swimming head, his brimming throat; then he lifted the sword, and her whole body rose with it, till only her heels and hands touched the ground, and he had to shake the blade violently to free her from it. He would not touch her flesh with his own.

Blood gushed from the wound, black in the moonlight. Alaric stabbed again, and yet once more, and at last he was satisfied that he had sent her beyond pain. He turned away then, the bloody sword a leaden weight in his grip, weighing down his heart as well as his arm, and he wept into the darkness, keening like a new widow. He wept for her and for all her kind that had gone before her, and he wept for himself as well, for the loss of something that he could scarcely name.

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After a time, his eyes dried and he began to gather leafy branches to spread over her still form. It was only a gesture of honor for the dead, for leaves would not keep the scavengers away come morning and the warm sun, but he had neither time nor inclination to dig a grave. He had dug a grave once, for his beloved companion Dall, and he could not bring himself to dig another and, by that labor, to resurrect so many painful memories. He covered her, and that would have to be enough.

He rose from his knees, still gazing downward, though her body was now no more than a heap of greenery in the light of the moon. A voice brought him to alert: "Hist! Minstrel!"

He took a step backward, sword upraised, body poised for his own peculiar sort of flight, and then his brain recognized that voice. The goatherd. He saw the boy as a dark shape detaching itself from the darkness of a boulder.

"Where are your goats?" Alaric asked softly.

"Sent home long ago. I have been watching you."

Alaric glanced all around, and he listened carefully to the night noises. He saw nothing but the peaceful, moon-touched landscape, heard nothing but the scratchings of insects. "Will the goats not stray without your guidance?"

"Once down the mountain, they go home happily enough," said the boy. He moved closer slowly, and Alaric could soon see that he carried his staff and his horn. There had been no bray of that horn, as far as Alaric knew ... but he had been gone for a short while. He wondered if the boy had seen him vanish; probably not, from that distance and in the shadow-riddled night.

"So you watched," said Alaric. "Did you know her?"

The boy bent, drew a branch aside to expose her face. He studied her features for some time, and then he nodded. "I know her."

"She was chained in the Red Lord's tower. He was torturing her without reason."

Again the boy nodded.

"She told me that she was not the first innocent to be taken."

The boy stepped nearer to Alaric. "Are you leaving?"

"Yes. I have no wish to die by torture." In the space of a heartbeat, he recalled the boy sitting at his feet, listening and whistling counterpoint to his lute, and he made a decision. "Would you like to come with me?"

"Come with you?"

"You could be my apprentice, learn the minstrel's trade, and see the wonders of the wide world."

"No one leaves this valley," said the boy. "It is the Red Lord's law."

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"*I* leave. Will you come along?"

The boy stood a long moment in thought, fingering the horn at his belt, and then he said, "Yes."

Alaric smiled stiffly — he feared it was more a grimace than a smile, for his face felt rigid, as if made of cold clay — and he stretched his free hand toward the boy. "Give me your pledge."

The boy clasped his hand firmly.

"What is your name?" asked Alaric.

"Valdin."

"Valdin, we shall be friends from this day forward."

"We shall be friends."

"Our journey begins now. Come, walk close beside me." Silently, he added, *And I shall show you a new form of travel.* He half turned away from the boy, to gaze up at the darkly looming mountain slope, and then a tremendous blow struck him across the back of the head, and he fell, rolling, tumbling, down the grassy path until he struck and wedged among some rocks. The sword slid from his nerveless fingers, clattering away in the darkness, and his arms and legs seemed to float away with it. The moon rocked crazily over his head, and the earth heaved beneath him as he struggled for consciousness. Above him, the horn bayed again and again, its note mingling with the roaring in his ears.

Dizzy and sick, he lay still, denying the call to oblivion with all the strength of his mind, and at last the world steadied about him. Feigning a swoon yet, he looked out upon the landscape through slitted eyes. The boy stood above him, staff raised for another blow. Without moving his head, Alaric could see down the slope some distance; he chose a spot that he thought the

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boy would have some trouble scrambling to quickly, and he went there.

Behind him, the boy's startled cry was loud. Alaric oriented himself swiftly, then flitted still farther away. From a safe distance, he watched and listened to the boy beating the brush for his vanished quarry. Soon, two men were toiling up the slope to join the youngster — Alaric guessed that he knew those two men well enough. They had not been with the boy long when his cries indicated that they were beating him. Alaric hoped they beat him well.

After they had gone back to their cottage, he returned to the burial site and found his sword and knapsack. He wiped the bloody blade on a clump of grass and sheathed it. The body was still there. He wondered if anyone but himself would ever mourn her.

Down at the river, the castle of the Red Lord sat grim and silent in the moonlight. Briefly, Alaric thought of vengeance, for himself and for her and for all those innocents who had come before — vengeance on behalf of folk too terrified or too resigned to seek it for themselves. Perhaps he was the one person who could wreak that vengeance and escape with his life. He grasped the pommel of the sword, and his hand shook and his head spun and he had to close his eyes against the memory of the black blood gushing out of her heart. *I have killed enough for now.*

He turned away. His head ached horribly, and he needed rest. The next mountain peak would be safe enough.

He did not even tell himself that someday he would return.

.....

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Yes. Well, there we are, reading an $8.95 book from a major publisher and gradually realizing it's no damned good at all. It's not that it's actively bad at what it's trying to do. It's that it's being mediocre at attempting nothing much.

Here we are, halfway through it, and it's increasingly clear that the character we thought an abrasive juvenile is intended to be witty and wise. The natives, whom we thought to be pulling an obvious scam on the naive terrestrials, really do pursue that patently stupid social system. Dumb luck, not some more subtle rationale of the author's, is all that accounts for their survival beyond the second generation. The heroine, who has quite sensibly been rejecting the protagonist's advances while waiting, with us, for the arrival of someone attractive, has just changed her mind simply because they are trapped in a cave overnight.

Clutching toward reassurance, we read the byline again, and by God it *is* that of a well-known person with a rising reputation. Turning to the dust jacket flap copy with clumsy fingers, we discover that this is a mind-exploding new novel, majestic in its scope and sweep, from an acclaimed modern sci-fi master. This assertion is borne out by the back flap copy, listing three or four awards from

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"Rips Aside the Sham and Ineptitude...."
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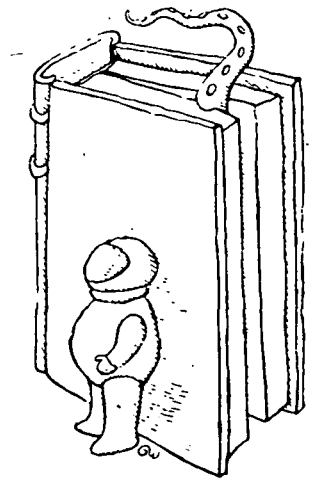
and other unkept promises



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several different awarding bodies, and a Virginia Kirkus quote reading "... modern ... dean of ... science fiction ...."

Discouraged from our own convictions, we feel too dispirited to wonder what the hell the Kirkus service might be, or what its purposes are. Snowed, we turn back to the book, left with the feeling that all our lives something has been unkiltered in our taste. We are faced now with the doleful task of rebuilding all our evaluative systems bit by bit, until at last our minds are worked around to the point of agreement with this sort of high-powered documentation.

Worse yet, alternatively we are sitting here a year later reading the same book in paperback. At a mere $2.85, it comes to us now plastered with review quotes:

"Masterful ... the highest achievement to date of a writer hailed as the forthcoming new H. G. Wells."

"A sure winner ...."

"A major work from a major artist."

"... Gripping, mighty, marvelously inventive ...."

"Hooks you right in the gut ...."

But all good things must end. Eventually, we turn the last page, lay the volume aside, frown, scratch our heads, rub our eyes, and say, with some curiosity: "Bullshit."

***

How do these things happen? How does a story which is recognizably a cliche copy of copies of another old story suddenly become "an exciting new futuristic glimpse, yet sharply relevant to today's endangered times"? How does somebody with pimples and a newly wetted arts diploma become "an insightful spokesman against the sham and error in Man's oblivious approach to Man"?

And just when did that become a selling point? SF is marketed exactly like Perry Mason, James Bond and the works of Zane Grey. Why is it, uniquely, often dressed up for sale with callow claims of social worth? Are we who read it seriously to believe that we are likely to find significant cosmic insight in the work of someone who has yet to rub up against the frustrations and contradictory lessons that balance the richness of adult life? Or, worse yet, of someone who is simply parroting the same instructors and texts to which we have also been thoroughly exposed? On the one hand, we are likely to get at best an engaging message from Volkenkukuksheim, and on the other we are being fed crib sheets for an examination we've already passed. Don't its purveyors realize that the only possible real value in the stuff, either way, is on some level of entertainment?

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Ah, but I was hoping I wouldn't get carried away. When I began this essay, I was thinking in some publisher's cubicle, charged with generating a sales brochure overnight for the entire Fall line and, of course, given very little material to work with. Let us suppose this person were actually to be supplied with reading copies of all these books. Would he or she have time to go through them before the brochure text deadline? Was he or she a job candidate here because of an affinity for books or because of a desire to get into the glamor field of Communications after graduating from college? Granting, for the moment, an honest liking for prose, are we permitted to assume a liking for *all* prose? Really? For Gothics *and* tough 'tec? For cookbooks *and* football novels? For astrology guides *and* Phil Farmer *and* Hal Clement? And an understanding of the needs and interests of the people who do have a liking for each of the selected portions of that spectrum?

Picture this person in actuality. Piled up beside the typewriter are little slips of notes jotted hastily at a packed sales meeting where various editorial departments have roughly described their contribution to the season's product line. In need of further research, granting time, there may also be Xeroxes of the precis originally supplied to the editor-in-chief by subordinate personnel pushing the manuscript up the heirarchy toward purchase. There are in fact no copies available of the text itself, which is at the typesetter's, racing toward its own deadline. The phone extension rings. It is Susan or Jared or Tad, the PR Director. Where the hell's the Fall copy? This isn't the Mount Holyoke *Angelus*, you know, PR person. Get on the stick.

So you do. You flip through your crib sheet on *The Long Arm of Gil Hamilton*, and bluffly describe to posterity "Niven's famed one-armed space detective," who just happens to have three arms, which is the author's major gimmick in a book which definitely needs a gimmick.

Who, in this case, is posterity? Posterity is all the people who get the publisher's advance brochure from which they often order review copies. Plus, sorry to say, the readers of review columns written by people who quote brochure copy verbatim instead of reading the book and expressing their own conclusions.

How often does that happen, you ask. It happens all the damned time. One example was the regular review column of a professional science fiction magazine, since out of business, which was "written" entirely by quoting the jacket flap copy of whatever came in. The

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column was bylined, and the person of that name described himself to the audience as a critic. Once he had done so, of course, he could be "quoted" on the covers of the paperback reprint editions.

That the publishers believe in the selling efficacy of this process is beyond question. The jacket copy is written for that purpose by a somewhat senior practitioner in the somewhat larger cubicle next to the brochure copywriter's. In the largest office, conferences are held at which is reviewed the "news release" copy which is mailed to Book Review Editor of every newspaper, magazine and broadcast station which has ever showed the slighest willingness to quote such copy in its communications to the public.

Many of the small media use it verbatim, whether they sign it with a staff name or not. Many of the larger media, which do assign staff creative talent to book items, run "features" which have obviously mined the news release copy for their major premises and conclusions. These circumstances are especially true in the case of a medium whose staff is too small to contain anyone with a knowledge of literature, and especially more true in the case of a "new" literature such as "sci-fi." That there are major exceptions is true. That they are exceptions is a shame.

Of course, PR-derived reviews continue to exist in part because hardly anyone ever protests a review on the basis of factual error. Most objections to review text are based on contrary opinion of some statement of opinion in the review.* Very few angry readers objectively set out points, such as three-armed vs. one-armed, which would demonstrate to the staff executive who buys the review that he is being caught in the purchase of defective goods. Managers in spurious positions are particularly prone to starts of guilt in such circumstances, and are apt to change away from the source that has made them look bad and thus disturbed their arrangements. Kept up long enough, this process would knock off a great deal of the subterfugitive endorsement currently enjoyed by unworthy product, and force basic changes in the system.

As it stands, however, few book review editors see much need to change. Quarrels over mere opinion are seen by them as signs of desirable reader interest. Should conscience ever prick them, they can always go to another alternative — the review service, which syndicates nominally objective story summaries. These are low-priced little fillers, produced by some process quite similar to the one that produces the original PR copy,

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since the writers are of necessity miserably paid and must grind out dozens of items in order to glean some sort of living.

The Kirkus Literary Service, incidently, is not one of these. It is a service to booksellers, citing the main selling points so that the busy storekeeper can reach a buying decision and has something to put in his ads. It is a valuable, legitimate aid to salesmanship, which I am the last to decry and whose difficulties I came to appreciate. But it is irrelevant to the literary value of the work. Quotations from "Bestsellers," "Bowker," and "Publishers' Weekly," fall into the same category of authoritative but irrelevant statement.

I do not mean to paint a picture of universal corruption and/or incompetence. I mean to describe a working situation based on the often unguidable effects of economics and legitimate self-interest. For instance, publishers who brochure reviewers, enclosing a review copy order form, then ship the review copies by Fourth Class mail. Presumably they do this to save money (for the first time in the process). The books usually arrive some days after commercial copies have gone on sale in the same places where you purchased this medium we are holding in our hands here. That immediately puts the review three issues behind the book.

If this column were to pretend to invariably timely review of first editions, or then their paperback reprints. I would have only two choices. By far the easiest would be to quote the brochure copy. The more difficult is to petition the publishers for galley proofs, which are, I assure you, a bitch to read, never include contents tables or copyright information, frequently show inaccurate prices, and are sometimes so badly typeset as to render certain passages unintelligible. But this is a minor point: few publishers are at all faithful in forwarding galleys if they aren't sure of favorable reaction, since galleys are expensive. Few reviewers really want galleys; they can't be shelved in the den, or re-sold, or given to the PTA auction.

Now I seem to be saying slight things about some of my colleagues. Well, some of my colleagues work hard, call editorial offices for clarification, track down sometimes obscure clues to interesting sidelights, and express themselves better than I do, for instance, from a deeper store of information and rumination. Some do not. Some can't bear to say an unkind word about anyone, and are thus a further source of jacket quotes containing words like "mightiest," "spinetingling," and "classic."

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Against this avalanche, a few editors must strive; these are the people who edit original paperbacks, for publishers who do not budget for PR departments. These are the people whose covers normally sport only blurbs: "In the Giant Tradition of...." "Stroked by the Towering Pen of ...." "Poured at White Heat From the Guts of ...."

One of these people once hit on a better idea, which was to furnish advance manuscript copies to a few selected Big Names, and quote their responses. So that now the cover copy could state: "Undeniably the finest SF novel I have Ever Read" — Fred Floopgrubber. The part of Floopgrubber* was enthusiastically played by an astonishing variety of people who, over their kitchen tables at night, when the light through the amber glass was increasingly unimpeded, expressed quite different opinions. But nobody likes to Knock in public.

I had no quarrel with that editor. I had been in a similar spot once, and never thought of that ploy. I admire him for it to this day. It was his job to sell his books, just as it is mine to nudge your attention a little this way and that. Some good friends of mine contributed quotes to him. The fact remains that his line of product was based on combing through what had been rejected by several strata of higher-paying and more prestigious publishers.

Under such circumstances, a fully knowledgeable and conscientious person of unflagging energy can produce one rather good book out of every three or four, and unearth one nearly topflight talent every few years. The man in question actually did a little better than that. But he did not like reviews in which some of his excesses were pointed out, and he probably will not like seeing them noted here again. It seemed to him a legitimate defense that he was pushed to it by commercial necessity, a face which I simultaneously endorse and dismiss as irrelevant to you in the position described among the opening paragraphs of this dissertation.

You will note a certain all-in-the-family wince in my description of his. Unavoidably, still too near its days of origin and the era of embattled clannishness among its practitioners, newsstand SF continues to be a genre in which we all know each other too well and in which far too many of us are alike each other. We do tend to ideological stratification — the technocrat conservatives of the 1940s, the entrepreneurial *faisseurs* on the 1950s, the 1960 limousine liberals, and the activists of the 1970s. This leads to generation-gap conflicts among us at various ages, but it also

*circa 1950, Redd Boggs

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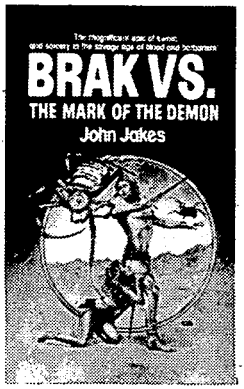

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leads to many an over-endorsement of a piece of work not because it is good on its own terms but because it is faithful to familiar terms. We are so Byzantine because we are as yet all of that family. We are so ready to renounce kinships, yet form ready alliances under flash banners, because we know each other from meeting at tense play in the corridors while the adults met solemnly — and discussed Grandpapa's increasingly heavy hand — behind doors as yet too heavy for us to push open.

And that, too, conditions what we say about ourselves and each other in the places where you, my friend, might expect honest guidance and accurate labelling.

But I hadn't meant to become so confidential with you. You asked a simple if profane question, and I have bent your ear. This is not a loveable trait, and above all I want to be loved.

Let us suppose for a moment, however, that these things are important to you. What can be done about making them closer to your heart's desire?

Well, if your local paper is printing obviously worthless reviews of SF, and it bothers you, try writing the editor with citations of chapter and verse; if you can match the review text word for word with the dust jacket copy, try forwarding

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that evidence. There's an outside chance the management will be dumbfounded to find an expert in its circulation, and may offer to let you try to do better. Then you can write to all the publishers for a spot on their review copy mailing lists. If you get on some of those, not only will your attic fill up with books but you'll get a chance to accumulate news releases and brochures, in numbers that suggest books *could* be cheaper if certain staff economies were made.

Or, if you have bought a book at a great price because it is bedizened with laudatory quotes, and you find that the book disappoints, nothing prevents you from writing to the editor in chief of the publishing company, whose address is on the copyright page or listed in "Editor and Publisher" at your library. You will almost certainly get no satisfaction except that of sending the letter, and you will get less than that if your argument is along the lines of "everyone knows Mars isn't like that, and besides the author is a well-known bad talent." But if the jacket copy says it's a major breakthrough in the history of SF, and it turns out to be a poor rewrite of a Chad Oliver* novelette from a 1953 *Astounding*, you might feel inclined to say "Look, it was (or wasn't) an OK story, but you promised NEW, you promised MAJOR, and it ain't." I wouldn't advise getting hot about it, if you want some attention paid, but I obviously wouldn't advise you to suffer in silence, either. If you bought nine bucks' worth of canned dove and it turned out to taste like albatross, you'd speak to the supermarket manager, wouldn't you?

You can also write to the author c/o of the publisher, but authors don't write blurbs or select review quotes, and they have troubles enough, what with editors and reviewers making impossible demands on them. Nobody writes any worse than they sincerely think the reader's looking for.

But should you do anything at all? Should I do anything, such as writing a column twitching aside some of the veil from the Great Mystery?

Ah, why not?

** Oliver did everything that will ever need to be done with anthropological SF, in part because that's his academic specialty, in part because he has a fair amount of talent at shorter lengths, and in part because the potential scope of the sub-genre is rather small. Practically all dealing-benevolently-with-the-natives SF is derived from derivations of Oliver, so thoroughly that most of its writers don't even know Grandpapa existed, back in the mists of 20 years ago. And if they don't know who they're cribbing from, what do you suppose the young editors know?*

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The Armageddon Decision

by HERBIE BRENNAN

Steinmann entered the museum still shaken by his dream of Sarai. The building was almost deserted: obviously it attracted few visitors on sunny days. He browsed over the Etruscan miniatures until his watch showed three minutes to eleven, then wandered casually into the Egyptian Gallery. After a few minutes, he found the Stele of Revealing beside a Middle Kingdom mummy case. He waited as instructed, ostensibly reading the card which translated the inscription. He was still thinking of Sarai, attempting to relate the upsurge of emotion with something in his situation or environment, when a hand touched his arm. "Dr. Steinmann?"

Steinmann glanced round and nodded. "Yes." The man was obviously Italian, very dark, very slender, somewhere in his middle fifties.

"Orsini," the man said. "Giovani Orsini." He extended his hand. "Welcome to Geneva, Doctor. I'm sorry we have to meet in this cloak-and-dagger fashion. We would have much preferred to welcome you openly at the airport, but I am sure you will appreciate the difficulties."

The handshake was cool and firm. "Not entirely," Steinmann said. He read Orsini's body language and found him not so much nervous as embarrassed and concerned. The knowledge brought a real degree of relaxation. Perhaps, after all, it was the experience of following secret orders which had evoked Sarai from her grave in his unconscious.

"In that case," Orsini said seriously, "I must thank you for your patience." He glanced around him, as if to ensure the gallery was deserted: as it was.

Steinmann stared past the fashionable lounge suit to some-

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thing in his stance which generated fresh associations. "I imagine you're a priest," he said.

Orsini blinked. "Is it so obvious?"

"Not without training." He took a final glance at the Stele of Revealing, then added, "What do we do now?"

Orsini looked uncomfortable. He took a slim billfold from his inside pocket and handed it hurriedly across. "Please take this. There is an amount of money in advance of your fee. There is also a single ticket for a coach tour which begins at three o'clock this afternoon. The coach, you will see, leaves from the William Tell Monument, which is quite close to your hotel. We would ask that you join the tour." His eyes searched Steinmann's face. "I understand part of your discipline requires a training of the visual memory?"

Steinmann nodded.

"Then please ensure you will recognize me again." There were minute tensions in Orsini's muscles, as if he expected a tactile examination.

Steinmann smiled slightly. "Well, yes ..."

"It is important, Doctor," Orsini urged seriously. "You must know me instantly, even though I will be dressed quite differently and in a new environment."

With a sudden surge of compassion, Steinmann nodded again. "Yes, I will certainly recognize you." Almost automatically, he related the dominant features to the name and personality traits. Then he released the picture for unconscious storage. Orsini achieved a permanent place in his memory.

"That is good." The breathing pattern showed Orsini sighed inwardly, as if the incident had been of vital importance. Aloud he said, "We should like you to behave like an ordinary tourist until the coach enters the square and the passengers disembark. You will please leave with them, but take a position at the end of the group. This is so you may slip away unnoticed."

"I see."

"The guide will take you through a colonnade. At a point along the route, I shall pass you walking in the opposite direction. Forgive me, but I shall not be able to acknowledge you."

Steinmann read that the embarrassment was genuine. "I understand."

"Shortly after I have passed you, you will reach a doorway on your right. It will be unlocked and unguarded. Please go through it, making sure no one sees you, and lock it behind you. The lock is a simple pressure plate about shoulder height. When you have done

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this, all you need do is wait. I will join you by another route."

To relieve the tension, Steinmann remarked lightly, "It sounds rather exciting."

Orsini smiled tightly. "It is childish, Doctor, as you must be very well aware. But it is necessary. The world must have no hint of your visit to the Vatican."

2

A garrulous American woman almost robbed Steinmann of his first view of Vatican City. She was delivering a monologue on Hoosiers — whatever Hoosiers might be — when the coach swung round a corner and a panoramic view of Lake Geneva opened on the right. Steinmann switched the woman from his mind. Across the water, he could see the gleaming walls and spires rising from the further bank. He had been only half prepared for the sight by his guidebook. It was smaller than the original Vatican, but the extensive use of marble made it vastly more impressive.

"So you see," the American woman said with an air of enormous satisfaction.

Steinmann, who saw nothing but the city and the lake, smiled and nodded with assumed benevolence. He was wearing, in deference to the tourist image, a white suit and a shot silk shirt. An airline bag by the side of the seat was packed with more sober attire.

In less than fifteen minutes, the coach was approaching the city gates. Close up, Steinmann was struck by the odd combination of garish tastelessness and Medieval splendor. The marble walls, so impressive from a distance, looked slick and plastic from their silicone treatment. Above the gates, a massive crucifix glowed softly golden as the coach triggered an electronic beam. But the gates themselves were genuine relics of a Medici fortress.

Steinmann thumbed his guidebook as the coach pulled up in the square. There had been no real attempt to duplicate the original Vatican, even in miniature, but some features remained. There was still a Vatican Library and still a Secret Archives, both sadly depleted. There was still a St. Peter's, still a Cistine Chapel, part built with original stone smuggled out of Italy, but lacking; alas, the glorious artworks of Michelangelo. There was still a Vatican Palace; and though security dictated that it received few visitors nowadays, rumor had it that none of its sumptuous appointments were less than three centuries old.

"Now this is really something," the American woman said loudly as the coach squealed to a halt. She looked round her with every indication of amazement. "Isn't

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this really something?"

"Yes, it is," Steinmann answered truthfully. It occurred to him that the differences between this and the original Vatican were, if anything, more interesting than the similarities. Vatican Radio was now replaced by Vatican Television, with full holographic projection. The slim mast cut across the skyline, dominating even the facade of the palace itself. And the Swiss Guard, with its centuries of tradition, had been replaced in unconscious irony by a Roman Guard. According to the guidebook, its armor was light plasteel, but the style would have been recognized by Caesar.

"I reckon everyone should see this," the American woman said. "Even if they aren't Catholic." She looked at him challengingly. "Are you Catholic?"

Steinmann shook his head. "Jewish."

For some reason, the woman looked pleased. "Oh, an Israeli?"

Steinmann shook his head again. Then, because he wanted to cut short the conversation, he said, "I was born in Anderstraad."

The woman's expression froze with embarrassment.

As the coach emptied, Steinmann dropped back carefully and walked with the group towards the colonnade. As they entered the shade, there was no sign of Orsini, although a Vatican dignitary was walking towards them in the regalia of a cardinal. He was almost past before Steinmann recognized him.

Steinmann dropped back further, found the door and slipped through without incident. He thumbed the pressure plate, heard the lock click, then waited. He was on the edge of another courtyard, and around it towered the Palace of Pope Benedict.

3

He felt a degree of annoyance that his training had not helped him pick up the posture characteristics. Because of the annoyance, he said, "So you are a cardinal. I should have treated you with more respect."

"On the contrary," Orsini told him, "if there are apologies due, it is I who must offer them. Both personally and on behalf of the Hierarchy. The manner in which we approached you, the manner in which you were forced to visit us — all this is most unforgivable. But perhaps soon you will understand the necessity."

Intrigued, Steinmann asked, "Where exactly are we going?"

"There is a small library above the chapel," Orsini said. "His Holiness is pleased to use it as a study. It is very private. I understand he awaits you there."

They stopped before a sliding

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door and entered a cubicle that Steinmann suddenly realized was an elevator. He watched with a sensation of delight as the door slid shut. "You don't use jump chutes?"

Orsini shuddered. "We prefer many of the old ways here, Doctor. It is a question of human dignity."

Steinmann found himself thinking again of Sarai as the elevator carried them in dignified fashion to the floor above the chapel.

4

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI was smaller than Steinmann had imagined, thin like Orsini, but older and more leathery. There were rumors he had received rejuvenation treatments, despite official Church policy, but if it was true, they did not show. To Steinmann's surprise, the Pope was dressed in the brown habit of a Franciscan monk.

Benedict walked towards them, hand extended without formality. "My dear Dr. Steinmann, how very good of you to come. Cardinal Orsini will already have told you how much we appreciate it." The English was without accent, but very precise: sure indication he was using a second tongue. "Won't you sit down?" He waved a blue-veined hand. "That chair is very comfortable. Shall you have tea? Or coffee? Or perhaps a little wine — we have some excellent vintages."

"Perhaps coffee," Steinmann said. He began to evaluate the stance and muscle tone. There was just the barest hint of a tremor in Benedict's extremities, but it was more an indication of his age than his psychological condition.

Orsini slid back a panel in the wall and dialed a combination on a gleaming autochef. The coffee materialized in china cups.

"An abomination," Benedict remarked, gesturing towards the machine. "But my younger cardinals insist we move with the times. I resist them so far as I can, but —" He smiled. "— one must accept the Pope is no longer infallible."

Steinmann smiled back, experiencing a sudden surge of warmth towards the man. He accepted the coffee and found it tasted good — better than most autochef concoctions.

"I should like Cardinal Orsini to remain," Benedict said. "If you have no objection, that is."

Steinmann blinked. "No. No, of course not." Role acceptances were beginning to develop. The Pope had become a penitent, with dominance as Steinmann's lot.

"You see, Doctor," Orsini put in mildly, "we have called you here in your professional capacity."

Steinmann glanced from one to the other. He had half expected it

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must be something like this; it was the only thing which would explain the pathological secrecy.

"Before we go on," Benedict said, "we should ask if you are prepared to act in your professional capacity." He seemed to hesitate slightly. "At whatever fee you care to name, of course."

Frowning, Steinmann said, "The fee is not the most important criterion."

"Indeed, no. For a man of your stature that is only to be expected. However, I must repeat my question. It is important that we know where we stand."

Steinmann took a deep breath. The decision, of course, had already been made. "I should be honored to help you, or your Church, in any way I can." A mischievous thought struck him and he added, "After all, it was founded by one of my people."

Benedict's face crinkled into another smile. "It is a relief to find you have a sense of humor, Doctor. You understand, of course, that anything you may learn must be held in strict confidence?"

"That is part of my professional ethic," Steinmann said without rancor.

"Of course. Of course."

Orsini started to say something, but Steinmann cut in. "Before we go any further, may I ask one question?"

"Please."

"Why have you not chosen a Catholic psychiatrist? There are many of the very highest caliber."

"That may become very clear to you in a moment," Benedict said. He looked at Orsini and nodded slightly.

Orsini evaded Steinmann's eye. "His Holiness —" he began. Then, apparently changing his mind, he said, "The Vatican Hierarchy and His Holiness wish to retain you, Dr. Steinmann, for whatever length of time is required to determine the psychological condition of His Holiness."

Steinmann looked from one to the other. Very carefully he said, "What exactly do you mean by 'psychological condition' in this context?"

Benedict smiled again, with what appeared to be genuine good humor. "Cardinal Orsini is perhaps being more diplomatic than he needs to be. I am told that for psychiatric examination one requires frankness." The smile faded and he looked very directly at Steinmann. "In this case frankness requires us to ask that you determine, as quickly as possible, whether I am mad."

5

Steinmann's quarters were luxurious, even to someone well used to luxury. There was even an

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original Caneletto on one wall, quite small, but priceless for all that. He approached the four-poster bed warily, but found it surprisingly comfortable. He got up again and examined the escritoire, fully prepared to find it was molded synthetic. It was, in fact, wood, and the aging might even have been caused by time and not the ministrations of expert craftsmen. His window looked out on the inner courtyard, now filled by a softly chanting procession. A hint of incense clung to the wood paneling.

Steinmann found the autochef and after two attempts successfully dialed himself a meal. The chicken soup was anemic, but the lamb was quite excellent. He dialed wine at random and was presented with a half bottle of Chianti Classico. It proved a little dry for his palate, but smooth and certainly acceptable.

He poured a full glass, took it to a Venetian armchair and sat down to think.

His eye caught a holographic projector head, rather cunningly integrated into the ornamentation of the frieze. He followed the line of the circuit until he discovered the controls, thoughtfully built into the wall near the head of the bed. He stretched out again with his wine and pressed a button. A six-foot cube built up in the center of the room, clicked milky white, then was abruptly replaced by two priests locked in some sort of heated discussion. The subject matter eluded him, for they were speaking in Latin. He searched for the tuning device which would switch to some more interesting station, but could not find it. He watched the priests half-heartedly for a little while more, then began to drift into sleep. He jerked from his doze as a gun fired in the room, and he discovered he was watching a news broadcast. Thankfully, the commentary was in English.

It was Anderstraad again, of course, with Ling's jackbooted minions efficiently executing some political opponent. The incident meant little in itself, but it brought back savage memories of Sarai. As if to underline the feeling, the field of vision cut to a meeting of the Union Parliamentary Council. He recognized Martin Allegro, face drawn as he delivered an impassioned anti-Anderstraad speech. Then the bulletin switched to a Zambian assassination, and Steinmann's interest waned. He switched off the set, stretched and dropped skillfully into sleep. But even his training was not enough to prevent the inevitable dreams.

6

Life was full of surprises. Overnight, they had installed a fully functional Rhamboid in the library.

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While he was waiting for Benedict, Steinmann ran through a standard test program and made the necessary adjustments. The controls felt beautifully fluid beneath his fingers.

"Is it suitable, Dr. Steinmann?"

Steinmann looked up from the control panel. "It's a beautiful machine, Father."

Benedict nodded. "German manufacture. I understand they do a good job on psychiatric machinery." He walked over to the examination chair and sat down, hands folded calmly on his lap. "Shall we begin?"

"If you are ready."

"Yes," Benedict nodded. "I am ready."

Steinmann crossed to place the helmet on the tonsured head. The contacts slid so easily into place he half suspected the machine had been specifically tailored to its patient. Then he returned to the controls, put on his own helmet and pressed a switch. The panel glowed.

"I experience nothing, Doctor," Benedict said calmly.

"No," Steinmann told him. "There is a waiting period while we both adjust." He glanced at the dials. Despite the calm facade, Benedict's respiration, heart rate, blood pressure, perspiration count and ch'i flow were all elevated.

"Can we talk?" Benedict asked.

"Yes. It will not affect things. If anything, it may help." He hesitated, made another minor adjustment. "As a matter of fact, there are some things I need to ask you."

Benedict smiled slightly. "Like the nature of my symptons?"

Steinmann glanced up at him. "Yes. I assume you have been showing symptoms; otherwise you would not have called me in."

"Your assumption is quite correct, Doctor," Benedict said. "I have been having what I believe to be visionary experiences."

"Visions?" Steinmann echoed.

"The Church has always held there are two types of such experience," Benedict said mildly. "One is a message from God. The other indicated psychological imbalance. We are hoping you can help us differentiate between the two in this case."

It was not entirely unexpected in the circumstances. Chosing his words carefully, Steinmann said, "I fear my philosophy does not encompass messages from the Almighty. The best I can offer is an indication whether your mind is sound. If it is, you must decide for yourself what else the vision might represent."

"We expected no more," Benedict told him.

A cool tone was sounding in his

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ears, the first faint indication of rapport. Steinmann said, "Is there a pattern to the visions?"

The lined face remained expressionless. Only the dials told of underlying tensions. "They concern the Apocalypse. Are you familiar with Catholic doctrine on the subject?"

"A layman's grasp," Steinmann said. "The war of Armageddon, isn't it?"

"A reign of evil, Dr. Steinmann. And the fight against it culminating in the Second Coming. I do not imagine you have thought much on the subject."

Steinmann twisted a knob a quarter turn anti-clockwise. He smiled slightly. "It has not been one of my obsessions, frankly."

"It has been one of mine since Victor Ling came to power in Anderstraad," Benedict said flatly.

Steinmann was so startled the rapport almost broke. He forced his muscles to relax and dropped automatically into the yogic breathing pattern necessary for stability. In a moment the cool tone returned. "I am afraid I fail to see the connection."

Benedict sighed. "Our doctrine is based on the Revelation of Saint John the Divine. A very curious document with few surviving copies now. The Biblical version is severly abridged, of course: a decision of the Council of Munich. Perhaps a wrong decision, I am prepared to admit, although it still stands after all this time. The abridgement has led to an unsophisticated mythology, I fear. Expectations of great beasts and scarlet dragons and signs in the sky." He sighed again. "I have studied the older document. God knows it is difficult, but the best minds of the Church suggest it is open to a rather more reasonable interpretation."

Steinmann's mind clouded briefly, then cleared again. Experience suggested he would establish full contact within ten minutes. "May I ask what type of interpretation?"

"There are two keys to the book," Benedict said. "The first is the eighteenth verse of the thirteenth chapter. In identifying the reality behind the symbolic picture of the Great Beast, John wrote: 'Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred three score and six.'"

"And this means something to you?" Steinmann asked quietly. His concentration was split between the words and the dials.

"As a scholar, yes. St. John was learned in a Jewish mystical system called Cabbala. Part of the system involved divining realities through numbers associated with names. As

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a Jew, you will be aware that Hebrew letters also represent numbers. Because of this, it is possible, in Cabbala, to add up the numerical value of a word."

"And you feel this addition points to something ... important?"

Benedict shook his head, a little awkwardly because of the helmet. He smiled. "No, indeed, Doctor. I am not a Cabbalist. My own opinion is that the system bore more relation to superstition than religious reality. But that is not important. What is important is that St. John used the Cabbalistic method. If we know how he counted the name, then we can guess what the numbers referred to."

"And do you know how he counted the name?" Steinmann asked.

"Yes," Benedict said flatly. "The method has been known for centuries. The number 666 refers to perhaps the greatest enemy of the Christian Church in John's day. The Latin *Nero Caesar*, transliterated into Hebrew and added in the Cabbalistic system, equates to six hundred, three score and six."

Surprised, Steinmann said, "Then John was not making a prediction? He was simply pointing a secret finger at the Roman Emperor?"

"That seems to be so, but before we can decide about the predictive element, we must turn the second key. Church historians, as you are probably aware, subscribe to the doctrine of cyclical history."

The tone changed, suggesting contact was no more than five minutes away. Steinmann said, "Not only Church historians, from what I can gather."

"No, indeed. The doctrine is generally academically respectable." He smiled again. "It even touches on your own speciality. The collective unconscious of our race throws up similar patterns at predictable intervals. The patterns become relatively clear, given a broad enough historical perspective. But we need not go into the technicalities, Doctor. Suffice to say we believe the pattern which produced Nero repeated in Germany in the 1930s when the Nazi movement arose. We suspect it may be repeating again now." He hesitated, then added very quietly, "In Anderstraad."

Steinmann felt a tension in his stomach. "You are suggesting the pattern which produced the Antichrist Nero and the Antichrist Hitler has now thrown up another Antichrist in Victor Ling?"

"I am suggesting nothing," Benedict said blandly. "As Pope, I am considering the possibility. Even though you do not subscribe to our faith, you can appreciate

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how important we would view such an eventuality. If Ling is indeed a focus for the same unconscious forces which produced Nero, then Ling is not merely an unruly politician, but a manifestation of the archenemy of the church. As such, the Church must take a stand against him."

Still tense, Steinmann asked, "A military stand?"

"We have that power now."

It was an understatement. Although interference was rare, the Church Militant remained one of the more important factors in modern international politics. As the thoughts raced through Steinmann's head, interlinked with thoughts of Sarai, he pressed the release control on the Rhamboid. The tone raised in pitch instantly. "Where do your visions fit the picture?"

"They confirm the suspicions of our historians," Benedict told him blankly. "They suggest the Church Militant should attack Anderstraad directly. You can see now, perhaps, why it is so important to determine my degree of sanity."

"Yes," Steinmann breathed. The Rhamboid process locked his body into stasis, then whirled his mind through the maelstrom to link it with the psyche of the Pope.

7

"An interesting experience," Benedict said as the helmet was removed. "I must confess my overwhelming reaction is one of embarrassment."

"That is understandable," Steinmann said. "It was the psychological equivalent of appearing naked in public."

The old brown eyes looked deeply into his. "And the result, Dr. Steinmann? Can you tell me the result?"

Steinmann shrugged. "I cannot say where your visions have originated, but it is my opinion that you are sane."

Benedict straightened, as if a weight had lifted from his shoulders. "Thank you, Doctor," he said quietly. "This will make our decision easy."

8

Orsini pressed a package into his hand. "Your fee, Doctor. Even though you would not name a figure, I think you will find this adequate."

Steinmann pocketed the package. "Thank you."

They walked stiffly through the corridors of the Vatican and reached a massive door.

"I must leave you here," Orsini said. "A priest will conduct you to the gates. You will find a personal flier waiting." He smiled slightly. "There is fortunately less need for secrecy now, although I know we

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can rely on your discretion."

"Yes," Steinmann said. He hesitated. "Cardinal Orsini?"

"Yes, Dr. Steinmann?"

"His Holiness has been through a Rhamboid test before, has he not?"

Orsini stared at him for a moment, then nodded. "How could you tell?"

"It is a very trying experience. I did not prepare him for it as carefully as I might have done — my mind was on ... something else." He thought of Sarai, pushed back the surge of emotion. He shrugged. "His reactions afterwards were wrong for someone experiencing the Rhamboid process for the first time. He took it far too calmly."

"I see," Orsini said.

With his hand on the pressure panel of the door, Steinmann said, "May I ask who administered the earlier test?"

"I administered it," Orsini told him. "I have had some psychiatric training."

Steinmann stared hard at him. "And your conclusions?"

There was not the slightest flicker of expression on Orsini's features. "Identical to your own, Dr. Steinmann. I found the Pope sane."

"Why call me in then?"

"The Hierarchy insisted. They felt, as a Catholic and a Cardinal, I might be prejudiced in my interpretation. They required confirmation from a psychiatrist who was not of the Faith and could therefore be objective. Yourself, Dr. Steinmann. And fortunately — He smiled. "— your findings confirmed my own."

Steinmann dropped his voice to a whisper. "The Pope is mad, Cardinal Orsini."

Orsini nodded gravely. "I know, Doctor."

"His visions are a direct result of uni-directional schizophrenia."

"Yes," Orsini agreed.

"The Rhamboid test leaves no room for doubt."

"No," Orsini agreed again.

"Why did you report Benedict was sane?" Steinmann asked. He could no longer read the man.

"Because I wish the Church to attack Anderstraad," Orsini said. "I believe Victor Ling to be an evil man, whether or not he is the Antichrist." He smiled again, a little sadly. "Please remember you confirmed my conclusions."

Steinmann took a deep breath. "I had a daughter, Sarai. She became involved in radical politics in her teens. Ling had her shot."

"I know," Orsini nodded. "That was why I chose you to administer the second test."

Steinmann walked through into the open courtyard. Behind him, he heard the heavy door click shut.

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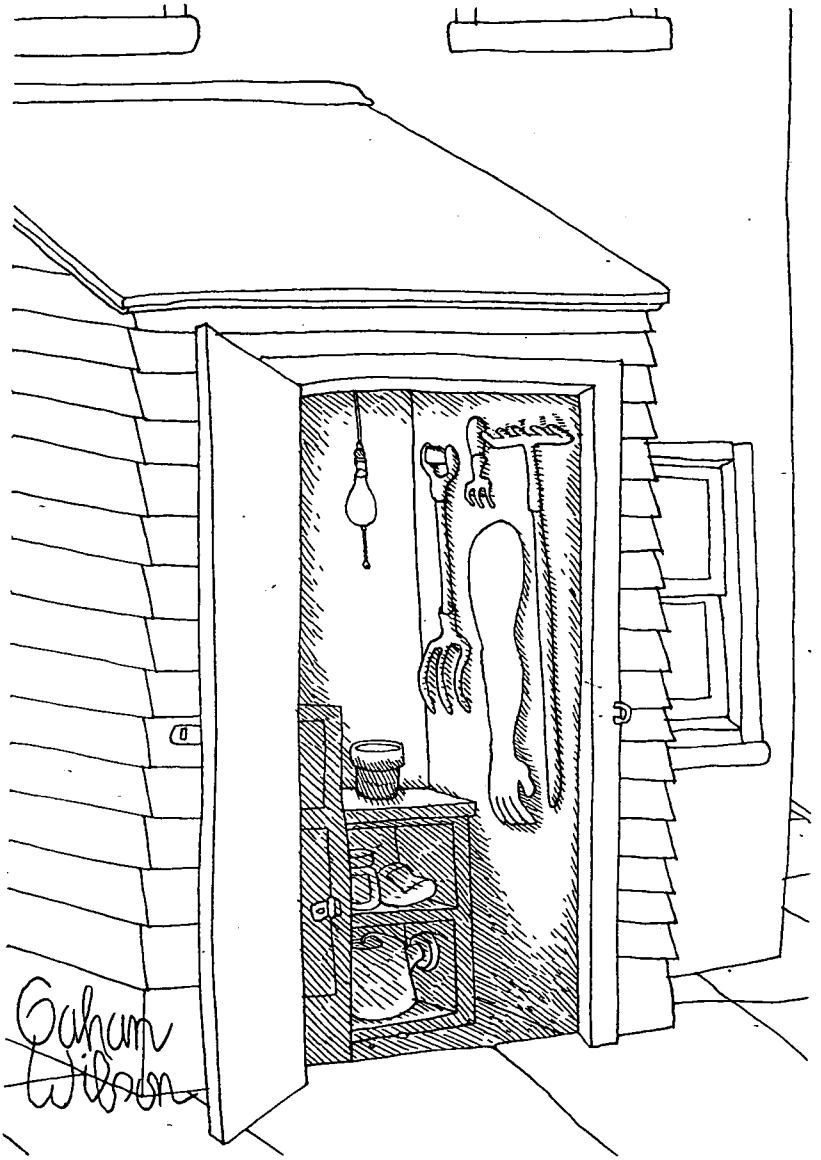

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Shadetree is one strange boy, and this is one of the scariest stories we've ever published.

Shadetree

by J. MICHAEL REAVES

Before the day that Shadetree killed his great-uncle, Colly Sue would come and sit with the two of them almost every evening and listen to the old man tell stories about ghosts, witches and haunts. She had done this ever since she was a child. Great-Uncle Arlie's house was an old unpainted shack with a breezeway — a wide, open corridor through the middle of it — and a rusty tin roof. Colly Sue would sit cross-legged in a straight-back chair during the stories because the gray wood floor had ragged, inch-wide cracks between the planks, and if she put her feet on those cracks, a haunt might reach cold hands from the darkness beneath and grab her. But Shadetree sat right on the floor. On occasion he would make Colly Sue cry by shoving his hand into one of the cracks and shouting that a haunt had him by the fingers.

Great-Uncle Arlie — which Colly Sue called him as well, though she was not related to him — was a thin and gaunt thing, hairless and shirtless, with suspenders stretched like cables over leather. His dry whispery voice telling stories of the haunts never failed to terrify the six-year-old child, but she came again and again, not only to hear the stories and to see Shadetree, but also to get away from her mother's house and the constant wailing of her baby sisters. Even at that age, a child's wailing wound all her muscles tight inside her.

She requested the story of Daisy and Walker over and again. She could almost mime the old man's creaking words as he told of how haunts were born of the dead, crawling maggot-small from the nose and mouth of a corpse as it lay rotting in its grave, and digging their way down to the underground caverns and tunnels that honeycombed the earth. A haunt was

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hollow inside and could not stand the sun; it looked quite normal except for its eyes, which were like black well-holes in its face. They lived on the insides of corpses and, after scooping them hollow, laid their eggs in the shell. A haunt never stopped growing during its lifetime, but mobility was difficult after it grew past twelve feet. They hibernated in the ground then, until their flesh merged with the ground and they died.

One day — so his story went — while walking in a ravine, a girl named Daisy found a cave and entered it. It was actually the nostril of a gigantic haunt, huge enough to have an entire community of haunts living inside it. They took her to eat and bury, and so breed more haunts. Her beau, a boy named Walker, searched for her all day. He wandered into the graveyard at sundown and, stopping to rest, heard laughter from within a grave and dug into it with his bare hands. There he found a haunt feasting on a corpse and forced it to tell him where Daisy was. He then led rescuers into the underground world to battle the haunts and save Daisy, and they lived happily ever after. That was Colly Sue's favorite story.

Shadetrees favorite was about the "swapchilds." They were small haunts exchanged for human babies, full of cunning and guile. Their task was to gradually lure everyone in the community into caves and graveyards, where they were dragged, screaming, into the dark below. When Colly Sue and Shadetree were ten years old and Shadetree walked her back to her mother's house, he told her a secret. On her mother's porch he leaned close to her, his green sunglasses shining in moonlight like the wings of June bugs. "I'm one," he told her.

"One what?"

"One o'*them*. Them swapchilds. But don't you worry," he assured her as she drew away from him, "I won't hurt you, Colly Sue. I'll never hurt you."

He turned then and left her, walking quickly down the packed red dirt of the road, which the moonlight darkened to a river of blood.

The next day Shadetree told their classmates at school that he was a haunt and that his merest touch would be enough to lure them down into the richly shadowed caverns that they all believed honeycombed Shadman County. The children believed him and avoided his touch as they would have a leper's. Colly Sue knew that this alienation was exactly what Shadetree wanted. He was a frail and moody child, with a skin condition that made him quite ill if he stayed in the sun more than three hours. It affected his eyes, and

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quite early in life he began wearing dark glasses constantly. His nickname grew from this illness, for during recess he always stayed under the old elms and hickories on the school grounds. He was uncomfortable in crowds and preferred to be alone; yet there was something about the pale, quiet boy that attracted and fascinated others. Only Shadetree could have declared himself a social outcast and, by doing so, become more popular than ever. One child, recently moved from Tennessee, tried to achieve similar status by pretending to be a witch-boy who had ridden eagle-back across the crags of the Great Smokies. The other children quickly put him in his place. Only Shadetree they believed — they came to him in terrified fascination for tales of the Underworld, and his refusal to speak of it only whetted their appetites for more.

Colly Sue, however, remained his only confidante. Only with her would he play children's games, and only because she shared his morbid turn of mind. They played tag on rocky slopes, where the slightest misstep would result in death; they would meet in the graveyard at midnight to topple tombstones, while horrific dinosaurs and behemoths made of trees and creeping kudzu vine brooded over them. She felt herself to be a misfit no less than he. For as long as she could remember, she had thought of the sprawling, two-story farmhouse where she lived as her mother's home, not hers. She knew that it was expected she marry upon leaving school — under no circumstances should she wait past twenty — and spend the rest of her life bearing babies and keeping house. That was not for her, she told herself firmly. Even as a child herself, she was repulsed by babies — their constant wailing, their soiled diapers and unceasing demand for attention. She loved everything else about life in Shadman County, but if she stayed, she knew she could not escape this fate.

Although Colly Sue believed for several years that Shadetree was a swapchild, she had no fear of him. Not then. Not even when it became popular opinion that Shadetree was crazy — that only drove her closer to him.

Most people came to that opinion after Shadetree killed Great-Uncle Arlie, even though the death was an accident. When he and Colly Sue were fifteen, her mother bought a four-wheeled riding lawn mower for the hired man to cut the yard. It was difficult to cut the tough Bahia grass around the old man's shack with a push mower, and so Shadetree began borrowing the machine. Great-Uncle Arlie hated the roar and smoke of the engine and would often follow Shade-

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tree as he rode the mower around the property, shouting and waving his wooden cane. One day, as Colly Sue sat on the butane tank and watched, Shadetree rode the mower too near the pebbled arc of the dirt driveway. The spinning rotary blade scooped up a stone the size of a cotton boll and shot it with great force and precision right through the old man's left temple. The *crack!* of the splintering bone was audible even over the roar of the engine. Colly Sue happened to be watching him at the time; she saw the dark red puncture appear as if by magic, saw Great-Uncle Arlie stand as if puzzled for a moment before folding, joint by joint, into a weathered and angular pile of clothes. Shadetree had not seen it; he continued riding the canopied mower around the house. Colly Sue did not scream. That was what the other women who lived in Shadman County, the brainless ones, would have done. Instead, she approached the crumpled old man and forced herself to touch the corpse, lift the head, check for a pulse. Great-Uncle Arlie was dead. There would be no more stories of haunts.

When Shadetree came around the house again and saw what had happened, he stopped the mower and joined Colly Sue. In the sudden buzzing silence they carried the dead man to the breezeway. John, Arlie's old bluetick hound, crept out from under the porch and began to howl. Shadetree threw a stick at him, then looked at Colly Sue.

"You got to tell your cousin E.A. something important," he said. His voice was quiet and soft, showing no signs of grief at all as he squatted holding the man's head.

"Tell him what?" Colly Sue decided that she would be damned if she would show any more emotion than Shadetree did. To prove she was strong, she pinched the dead eyes shut, but the head lolled at such an angle that they fell open again.

"You got to have him promise that he won't embalm Uncle Arlie." Shadetree released the corpse and put his hands on Colly Sue's shoulders — his right thumb left a spot of blood on the crisp white cotton.

Her cousin was the local mortician. "Whatever for? E.A. could go to jail for that!"

"It's not against the law," Shadetree told her. "Say it was Uncle Arlie's last request."

"That waren't never no request of his," Colly Sue said slowly.

"It's a request of mine," Shadetree said. "That old man ain't gonna be embalmed." He hesitated, then explained, "The haunts need him, is why."

Later, people labeled his increasingly solitary ways as madness

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and dated it from his great-uncle's death. He did not seem changed to Colly Sue, however, save for his insistence in clinging to his fantasy. She did as he requested, and the old man was laid to rest intact. It would make no difference to Great-Uncle Arlie, and it meant much to Shadetree. Other people's mutterings about him made her worry, though. She knew that Shadetree was gentle, if morbid, that he would never harm anyone and only worried that others might harm him.

In due time, they graduated from high school. It had been assumed by everyone that Shadetree would marry Colly Sue, an arrangement that Colly Sue's mother was not happy with. Neither was Bubba Colbin, a red-headed burly farmer's son who wanted Colly Sue. Colly Sue's mother approved of Bubba. She was a small, sour woman, slowly dying of a lung disease, and her one desire was to live long enough to see her grandchildren. Colly Sue's younger sisters were already married; if she wanted to inherit the farm and land, she was expected to follow the pattern.

Her virginity had been troubling her. In Shadman County, most women remained virgins until married, or at least married the first man they bedded. To do otherwise was to gain a reputation. The unfairness of this was obvious to Colly Sue — still, she had to decide if she wanted to defy convention for its own sake and to satisfy her growing desires at the expense of needless trouble for herself. It is always hard to be a pioneer. Added to that difficulty was the fact that no man she knew, including Shadetree and most especially Bubba Colbin, appealed to her sexually.

Bubba, however, wanted Colly Sue, and what Bubba wanted he was accustomed to having.

He took her to a movie at Beatriceville one night, and on the way back he attempted to seduce her. Outspokenness and independence in women had always been equated by the men of Shadman County with looseness, and so he was surprised at the strength and desperation with which she fought him in the cab of his old Dodge pickup. Seduction quickly escalated into rape. She was stronger than he thought a girl could be, and at last, knowing he would not enjoy it this way, he told her he would tell her mother that she had been sleeping around unless she let him have his way. Her mother believed anything Bubba said, and Colly Sue knew her condition was such that this lie could kill her. Though she had always felt a stranger in her family, still she loved her mother. And so Bubba had her, but he did not enjoy it. Colly Sue spread her legs and fixed him with a terrible glare which she kept on him like a

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lantern while he groaned his way to climax. She did not move an inch during the act, not even when he broke her hymen, and he bruised his lips on her tight-set mouth. Nor did she move afterward while he drove her home, but lay there in that same awkward and accusatory pose until he threatened to hit her.

She still met Shadetree in the graveyard on occasion, as they had done when children, and this time she told him what Bubba had done. "There ain't no way," she cried, "that I'm marryin' him. God blast him dead at four o'clock in the morning, that —"

"Marry him," Shadetree said.

She stared at him, stunned. "Shadetree, you can't mean it!"

He pulled a length of Spanish moss free from a crumbling cross and stroked it. "Oh, I do," he replied. "I do. The pressure's on you to get married. Cain't inherit the farm til' you do. Well, then, get married, and leave it to me. I guarantee you'll have your respectability and your freedom."

"Just what you plannin'?"

"Folk feel sympathy for a woman whose husband deserted her," he said.

She stared at him, half-hidden in the shade of a curtained oak, and slowly smiled.

And so the wedding came to pass, on a lovely spring day at Burnt Bluff Church. People whispered approvingly that the bride appeared a proper lady for once in her life, scrubbed and set in lace, and smiling obediently as the pastor gave her to a sweating, tight-collared Bubba in holy wedlock. She wondered if anyone noticed the clawlike set to her fingernails as Bubba kissed her.

Afterward was the reception, which was held at Colly Sue's mother's house — though she was now named in the will, she still could not think of the place as hers. Her mother was too ill to come downstairs, which was just as well — Colly Sue did not know what Shadetree had planned, but she knew the way his mind worked.

Pictures were taken of Colly Sue and Bubba feeding each other cake and posing in front of the wreaths. There was an impressive stack of presents from Bubba's side of the family, mostly for him, tools, new coveralls, and the like. Shadetree had not come to the reception, and though Colly Sue knew it was a good idea, still she felt alone and alien in the midst of these familiar strangers. Bubba kept leering at her and pinching her while people watched. She hated him more each moment — the thought of frightening him out of Shadman County by whatever terrorist campaign Shadetree had devised had her trembling for its start.

At last the bottom of the pile

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was reached, and the last present — a small square box, wrapped in coal-black paper, with a ribbon of glossy black. A red card, like the hourglass on a black widow, said simply: *Bubba Colbin.* When Bubba lifted it in his calloused hands, the laughter and light banter trickled into silence, as all the guests and inlaws stared at the ominous present.

Colly Sue stared too, with mounting excitement. This, then, was the beginning. Bubba was too bull-stupid to feel anything other than annoyance that the party had been spoiled, and so, in dull anger, he ripped the package open. A rending of cardboard, the cold rustling of tissue; Bubba leaped back with a curse, letting the torn box hit the floor, letting its contents roll free of the wrappings: a skull, yellowed bone gleaming under the chandelier, bits of rich graveyard loam still packed in eye sockets and jaw joints. A clot of earth broke open on the carpet, disclosing a writhing worm which burrowed into the shag.

The screams began.

As the crowded room began to empty by all exits, women holding handkerchiefs to their mouths and collapsing in the arms of pale-faced men, Bubba tore his glare from the dead staring thing at his feet and fixed it upon Colly Sue. He was also pale, but there was such anger in his eyes, such a swelling of his shoulders that she held her face like a stone, knowing that the slightest confirmation of his suspicions in her expression would surely cause him to strike her dead.

That was the beginning of Shadetree's campaign to scare Bubba Colbin away from Colly Sue. But Bubba did not scare easily. He was a stubborn scion of dirt farmers, burrowing deeper and deeper. He did nothing about the first incident, though it was common opinion that Shadetree was responsible. There was, after all, no real proof. Subsequent happenings, all quite grisly but essentially harmless, had no more effect. It was apparent that Bubba could not be frightened away by such childish tricks. Colly Sue was disappointed in Shadetree — she had expected a campaign more complicated and subtle. It did have results, however. After a few days Bubba's patience wore thin, and he correctly guessed that the best way to put a stop to this harassment was to beat Colly Sue. This remedy was partially successful — it did stop the juvenile stunts.

The next day Shadetree sat on the porch with Colly Sue, waiting for Bubba to return from the barn.

Colly Sue had tried to talk him out of a confrontation, but Shadetree was adamant. "We gave him hints aplenty," he said. "He should've taken 'em."

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"You got no idea what he's like, Shadetree! He's not playing games, he'll *kill* you!"

"You just watch," Shadetree said complacently, as Bubba's pickup jounced into the driveway amid a cloud of red dust.

Bubba stepped onto the porch, shoulders set and head lowered. "You got no business on my property," was his greeting.

"You had no business marrying Colly Sue," Shadetree replied.

Colly Sue saw Bubba glance at her. She said nothing, merely stared back with one eye, the other being swollen shut as a result of her beating. She knew he was looking with pride upon his handiwork.

Bubba looked back at Shadetree and smiled lopsidedly. He leveled a finger like a weapon at the thin, pale man. "So you want me run off," he said. "You think you can scare me away from my woman and all that property she's set to inherit. Well, you gonna have to do way under better than you been doing to make me scat."

Shadetree smiled then, suddenly and somehow most frighteningly. "No," he said softly. "You're pure wrong. That ain't what I want at all."

Bubba hesitated just an instant before asking, "What, then?" His voice was just a trifle too loud, and Colly Sue realized with amazement that he was nervous. She, too, was uneasy; she had never seen Shadetree act like this before.

"You," Shadetree said to Bubba. "Dead."

Bubba looked the length of Shadetree's pipe-like frame, barked a note of laughter and swung his fist. He outweighed Shadetree by almost a hundred pounds. His fist was the size and shape of a large eggplant. The blow never connected. Shadetree caught it in midcourse and held him by the wrist, impossibly, without a tremor of his thin arm. Colly Sue watched in shock as he seized Bubba's neck, which was bigger than Shadetree's thigh, and *lifted* him off his feet. He shook Bubba as a hound shakes a weasel, though in this case the proportions were reversed. Then he dropped him. Bubba landed heavily on the stone steps, rolled over and stared up at Shadetree.

"Run," Shadetree suggested.

Bubba ran.

Shadetree leaped from the porch and followed. Colly Sue stood paralyzed, watching the events happening with dream slowness. Bubba, with mouth working around terror, leaped into his pickup, twisted the key and stamped the pedal almost before he was touching the seat. The tires spat gravel and the truck leaped forward, door still open, Bubba hanging onto the wheel, fighting for control. Colly Sue watched Shadetree running

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with long, somehow *elastic* strides that rapidly closed the gap between him and the speeding pickup. Bubba stared over his shoulder — Colly Sue could see his eyes shining with fear like the eyes of slaughterhouse cattle. The truck hit a patch of soft dirt and fishtailed, the left rear fender slapping Shadetree away like a bothersome insect. He landed, rolled and sat up, staring expressionlessly. Bubba was hugging the wheel as the truck spun completely out of control and collided with the butane tank.

The explosion knocked Colly Sue off her feet and brought blood from her ears and nose. A brief geyser of flame enveloped the truck, and then there was a second slamming thunder as the truck's gas tank blew up. Colly Sue lay dazed, watching the orange and black column climb up the curve of the sky and beyond the porch roof. When it finally began to subside, she found her feet and stumbled shakily over to where Shadetree stood beneath the shelter of a magnolia tree, staring at the pickup's blackened metal skeleton. She stood beside him, numbly. And after a time he sighed, shook his head and said sadly, "Hardly a bone left to bury. Ain't that a goddamn shame."

And she knew quite clearly that his regret was that the haunts would have no cold flesh to gnaw, no swollen body in which to incubate their foul brood. She thought of old Arlie's tales of them crawling, wormlike, in the caverns below the land, perhaps beneath her very feet. Any other woman of this county might have screamed and fainted, and so Colly Sue would not let herself do that. What she felt was anger, overwhelming anger at Shadetree for daring to think of his fantasy at a time like this, after a human being, even one deserving of death, had met such a horrible end. In a sudden fury she turned to him and struck, clawed four fingernails down the side of his face. He stepped back, one hand going to his cheek as though to hide it, then stopping, for she had already seen the results of her attack.

He was not bleeding.

And then, with a rushing soundless roar in her head, the last of the numbness dropped from her, leaving her free to remember how Shadetree had lifted Bubba with superhuman strength, how he had chased the pickup with those hideously long strides, and every one of the times since they were ten years old that he had told her what he was.

She turned and ran from him, then. And as she ran, through the sharp slashing corn away from Bubba's house, she heard him call again, softly: "I'll never hurt you, Colly Sue."

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Colly Sue told no one that Shadetree had been responsible for Bubba's death. It was easy enough to put the blame on drunkenness. There was some talk, but, again, nothing could be proved. She was a widow now and not expected to seek another husband until after a proper time of mourning. Time enough to worry about that then. Her mother had assured her that the farm would be hers, since it was evidently God's will that she be alone for a time.

She avoided Shadetree for the first time in their lives. She did not know what to do about him. No one would believe he was one of old Arlie's scare-stories; as time insulated her from that day, she did not know whether or not to believe it herself. She had heard that insane people possessed fantastic strength. The more deeply committed to their delusions, the more they entered the role, even to the point of controlling autonomic bodily functions such as bleeding if it suited their purposes. Shadetree must be mad then, totally and completely insane. She had never seen him hurt anything before, but now there was always the possibility that he might turn on her one day. And, yet, she could not bring herself to tell anyone he was dangerous.

Though she had escaped her marriage and was now assured a farm and income, there was no happiness in her life. Her break with Shadetree was not the only reason for this. The week after Bubba died, the doctor confirmed her suspicions; she was pregnant.

The news stunned her. Happiness had been so close, and on its eve her best friend and her body had both betrayed her. There was no alternative to having the child. An abortion was unthinkable. No local doctor would perform one, and the stigma attached to it would make her anathema in Shadman County. To put the child up for adoption would also cause talk. The community was too isolated, too dependent upon itself for her to safely flaunt its strict morals and mores and not make trouble for herself. She did not know what to do. Her confidant and advisor was lost to her now. To her relief, when they encountered each other on roads and in stores, he never tried to force recognition. He merely watched her with what some thought was sadness and what Colly Sue feared was something more sinister.

As the months passed, she watched her body swelling with this alien lifeform, this other; a usurper who would control and dictate her life for the next twenty years. She did not want it, and yet there was no way she could rid herself of it.

Her mother, ailing for longer than she could recall, began to sink

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slowly, finally, toward death. She remained in bed constantly, soiling the bedsheets, plastic tubes in her nose bubbling softly as her lungs rotted. Yet she clung to the shreds of her life, grimly determined to keep her pledge and hold her grandchild in her flaccid arms. She failed. Weeks before Colly Sue's time was due, the bubbling stopped, and her mother expired quietly in the night.

Colly Sue still did not believe the stories of the haunts — had never believed them, she told herself. Yet she spent quite a lot of the family money to have a special mausoleum built for her mother — she would not see the old woman lie in the ground. The farm was now hers, and yet she felt no sense of triumph. The child was imminent, the tiny intruder who would make life miserable for her. What could she do?

It was winter now, the ground hard and frozen and lightly dusted with frost. The first heavy snowfall was threatening. Colly Sue spent her days in dreadful expectation. The hired hands did the chores, and she stayed in her room on the second floor, where it was always cold. Coldness now seemed right to her.

The child was born.

It arrived exactly seven months from the day the doctor gave her the bad news. The doctor was there to perform the delivery, summoned at six thirty on an icy-clear morning. The delivery was a painful one. The child was a boy, with Bubba's large shoulders, and Colly Sue had a narrow birth canal. At last there were the shattering sounds of a slap and the baby's cry — the first of many, Colly Sue thought. The doctor laid the wizened monkey-form on the bloody quilt beside her. She turned her head away from it and stared out the window at the brittle sky.

The next day, as evening was beginning, the door of her room opened and Shadetree entered.

Colly Sue looked at him without surprise, and without fear. She realized that she had somehow been expecting him.

He looked down at the infant nursing at her breast, at the resigned expression on her face. "Strong-looking boy," he said.

She sighed. All feeling, all terror, had been leeched from her. "What you want?" she asked this stranger she had known for a lifetime.

He pointed. Again, she was not surprised.

"It'll be so easy," he said. He seemed nervous, ill-at-ease, his eyes wide and intense. "Say you was sleeping, the window open. Someone clumb up the trellis. You never saw who it was. You'll never see the boy again, won't be troubled by it

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no more. Give him here, Colly Sue. Please. You owe me this much."

It would be so easy. She felt a great tiredness as she asked, "What for you want the child, Shadetree?"

"You know what for," he whispered. His gaunt and ridged form was trembling. "For the haunts, Colly Sue, the haunts... for to swap."

"What makes you think I'd want a holler-eyed night-thing when I can't even stand a human child?"

"It don't have to be you what takes the swapchild," he assured her. "We'll put 'im in somewhere else. But a balance's got to be kept, don't you see? We got to have a human child to swap for."

She was suddenly too tired by far to play this game with him again, ever. "Stop it, Shadetree. Almighty God, please stop it."

"You hate the child," he hissed, and terrible eagerness shook his voice. "I'm offering you release! You'd gladly of had it aborted, wouldn't you?"

She nodded wearily. She could not put into words how she felt. She still loathed the child, yes, but conditioning was too strong to ignore. She knew a few months on either side of the womb made no real difference. This was not yet a thinking creature; it had only the most rudimentary self-awareness. It was no greater sin to kill it now than to have aborted it in the womb. But a child at her breast, however unwelcome, was not the same as a fetus, and she could not give it to Shadetree.

"Go away from me," she said.

He straightened, his knuckles whitening like unearthed roots on the brass bed railing. "Colly Sue, you got to," he said desperately. "Listen — I was raised too human — I couldn't never bring myself to lead folk down under. I'm in trouble, Colly Sue. I bought time by giving them whole corpses, unembalmed, but they aint satisfied with that no more. They want a child, and I mean them to have yours!" And with that he bent over her and scooped the baby from her breast, then was out the window in one long stride. She ran to the window and watched him go, like a spectral scarecrow across the darkening fields. With him went her last obstacle to the life she wanted to lead, a life completely her own. All she had to do was let Shadetree take the child and —

— bury it alive.

She did not call for help. The hands had all taken off for the night. Instead she took her rifle, loaded it, and started after Shadetree.

She struck out in the direction she had seen him take, across the south forty towards the hills. It was quite dark now, but a full moon

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had risen, white-shining like the skull that had been Bubba's wedding present. By this leprous light she soon saw him, crossing the second in a series of ridges like rumples in a blanket. It had snowed that day, and the mantle gave back the moonlight, fluorescent, dead light for a dead world. The only sound was a distant howling, like a dog caught on a barbed-wire fence. She neither lost nor gained on him. Shadetree moved swiftly across the lunar-colored landscape under the grasping skeletal trees, and Colly Sue followed.

The baby was not crying. She wondered if he had killed it already. The possibility aroused neither hope nor fear. It might have been a rag doll Shadetree carried. She wondered why she followed, and had no answer.

Either Shadetree slowed his pace or she quickened hers, for she began to gain on him as he picked his way up the scattered talus of a ravine. The child was crying now, a thin, wailing cry that touched no heartstrings within her. She saw his destination and quietly cut across a ridge to meet him there. When he came around a shoulder of rock, she was standing before the cave, rifle pointed at him.

When he saw her, a look of utter despair filled his face. "Why did you come?" he cried.

"Give back the child," she said. Her words frosted in the waiting air.

He ignored her words. "I won't let them take you," he said, and at that she felt a sudden, freezing fear that the cave behind her was the nostril of a giant haunt and that *they* were coming —

She whirled, and Shadetree struck.

Though he was over twenty feet away, he seemed to cover the distance instantaneously and had the rifle barrel in his free hand. He twisted it — the barrel bent, and the stock tore from her grip. But in the moment before he could cast it away, while both hands were full, Colly Sue leaped at him. They fell backwards down the slope, the shrieking child rolling free, Colly Sue clawing at Shadetree's face. Her thumb hooked the wire earpiece of his sunglasses, and she tore them from his face.

What she saw affected her like a blow; she fell away from him, scrambled to her feet, seized the baby and ran. The bloated moon spotlighted her as she tumbled her way down slopes and through copses. She glanced behind her once and saw Shadetree close behind her, running noiselessly as a lizard. She had seen him overtake Bubba's truck and knew he could have her in a moment if he tried, but he did not. Breath scorching her lungs, she ran... then they were in the

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woods, her face whipped by branches, the child's voice a constant keening. And Shadetree was always close behind her, Shadetree, smiling at Arlie's stories, alone and aloof at school, holding Arlie's body, telling her "marry him," holding Bubba aloft, hiding his bloodless scratches... a thousand images of the horror close behind her as they broke free of the trees and she stumbled over a gravestone and fell.

Silence. The baby lay stunned, twitching feebly.

Colly Sue rolled over, felt blazing pain in her hip. She stared at the graves about her, stark in the moonlight, and recognized where Shadetree had herded her.

He stood at the edge of the graveyard, sobbing. "They made me do it, Colly Sue," he cried. "I never wanted to hurt you." The agony in his face was made hideous and mocking by the empty black holes of his eyes.

She heard then the scrabbling sounds beneath the ground, all about her. They grew louder, the sound of earth being ripped and clawed. Beside her, a pale clawlike hand broke through a grave. Another, near her feet, seized her ankle.

She would not, could not, scream.

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This short chiller is George Clayton Johnson's first F&SF story, however Mr. Johnson is fairly well known in the sf field through his work for television (Star Trek, The Twilight Zone) and his co-authorship of LOGAN'S RUN.

Devlin's Dream

by GEORGE CLAYTON JOHNSON

I came out of the darkness with the sound of Cooney's yell banging in my ears. We was bedded down alongside two willows outside of Tensleep, and Cooney was laying there with his eyes tight-shut and the worst look on his face I ever seen. Scared, that's what he was, and still half asleep. "What's got into you?" I said. I throwed my weight on him to keep him from doing anything foolish, and when his breath stopped catching, I let up a little. "It's me!" I said, sharp. "It's me, your pal. Whitey!"

"Oh, Whitey, Whitey it was awful!"

It made me freeze to hear him talk in that pitiful tone. I've seen him face up to dying, cool, and never heard a quiver in his voice. "What is it?" I said, gentle. "What's taken hold of you?"

He went over to the fire and hunkered down in front of it. I moved to where I could see his face with the fire flickering on it. You don't push a man like Cooney. You wait till he's ready to tell you what he wants to tell you. "I was standing on a black hill all alone," he said, finally, staring at the coals. "There was a hawk circling in the dark sky. It was a judgment on me." He shuddered and held his right hand up to the firelight, working his fingers, his face fearful. He looked at the hand like it was a strange thing while the fingers twitched with a palsy. I didn't say anything because there wasn't anything to say. I throwed a dead willow branch on the fire and waited while the sound of the birds faded off on the prairie. "A judgment," he said again, in a hollow way. Of a sudden his voice got loud and harsh — full of pain. "I didn't have no

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arm, Whitey, don't you see? I didn't have no arm! It was off to the shoulder, Whitey! Gone! Cut away! What does it mean, boy? What does it mean?"

I had to look away. The cold pressed in from the prairie. "Nothing. Cooney, it don't mean a thing." But my voice wasn't none too steady.

I rustled us some grub, and when things was put away, Cooney went to his saddlebags and took out his pistol. His eyes went hard and he buckled it on. Peculiar. He put the holster on his left side instead of his right.

"Should we maybe go on into Tensleep?" I said.

He didn't answer, just walked off up an arroyo.

I waited all morning for him to come back, and along about noon I went looking for him. He had his holster tied low on his leg and was practicing a quick draw with his left hand. He didn't know I was there. Along about dark he came back. We had some grub and turned in. He slept like a man with snakes in his bed.

We camped by those willows for three days, and I didn't have to follow Cooney to know what he was doing. I knew we wouldn't budge from there till he was satisfied he could get his pistol out as fast with his left as with his right.

On the fourth morning we got our gear together and headed for Tensleep.

We put up at the hotel, washed the prairie off us and went down to the Hashknife bar. I still had a double eagle and was dry as a dusty gopher. You know what happened next. Old Cooney started hard-eyeing everybody that came in. He picked out a squat Swede with a wind-burned face. The man had a big bone-handled pistol hitched to his middle. Part of the holster was cut away around the trigger and the leather had an oiled look. To me, and to Cooney too, I guess, that meant he knew how to use it. "Come away, Cooney boy," I said. "He ain't done nothing to us."

By this time the Swede was looking at us and talking low to the bartender. Next time I looked that way the bartender was gone.

"That dream didn't mean nothing," I told Cooney.

He looked at me fierce, his eyes pink around the edges. "Damn the dream!"

The Swede had moved down to the end of the bar and looked like he was trying to make up his mind to leave.

Of a sudden that look come over Cooney — the one he'd had that night. "It was a judgment. I'm going to lose my arm! What will I be then? What will I be with no gun arm?" He was talking loud and everybody could hear him.

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"You'll be Cooney Devlin," I said. "Ain't that enough?"

"I'll be nothing! I'll be someone to shove out of the way! I'll be someone to pass over for better men!" He looked up at the ceiling like a man demented and his voice was a cry. "Take my arm! Take it, but I'll be ready! One arm or two, there ain't no better man than Cooney Devlin!"

I flinched back. He was talking to God.

He stepped away from the bar and glared at the Swede. "If you know how to work that fancy gun, then do it, 'cause I'm going to kill you!"

The Swede tried, I'll give that to him. He was facing a crazy man and knew it. He had that bone-handled pistol half out of the leather when Cooney shot him dead. His hinges stopped working and he skidded out on the wood floor like something broken. I backed away from Cooney, ice-cold. He'd done murder and everybody saw it. I eased my pistol into my palm and held it at my side. Cooney was wrong, but we'd been partners too long. I hoped he'd hightail it, I was ready to clear the way for him; but, instead, all the mad seemed to drain right out of him.

He looked at the Swede on the floor in a sorrowful way and straightened up like a man who'd proved something important to himself. He unbuckled his gunbelt, switched the holster around to his right side and fastened it again. Nobody moved in the room.

With the pistol on his right side he looked like the old Cooney once more. His fear had left him. He was fixed to use his right hand again because now he knew his left was ready in case he needed it.

I relaxed some and put my pistol away, a mistake, because the next instant the sheriff busted in with the bartender behind him. "I'm arresting you mister, so you'd better come easy."

Cooney shook his head, stubborn. He didn't think he'd done nothing wrong.

The sheriff rared back. He was a skinny old galoot with a long mustache and a lot of wrinkles in his neck. Cooney standing him off like that made him awful nervous. He was in deep water, and all of a sudden it come to him he was about to die. His face looked like it had been made with a jackknife.

He could have backed off, but a man don't get to be sheriff of Tensleep who thinks that way.

"You killed Charlie Benson, so that makes you faster than me," he said in a soft voice. "Maybe you are and maybe you ain't. One way or the other, it don't make no difference because I got to take your gun." He took a step toward Cooney.

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I saw the bartender go out of sight. Everybody edged back out of the line of fire, including me, and for a few moments you couldn't hear anything except a bluebottle fly hammering against the glass in the front window.

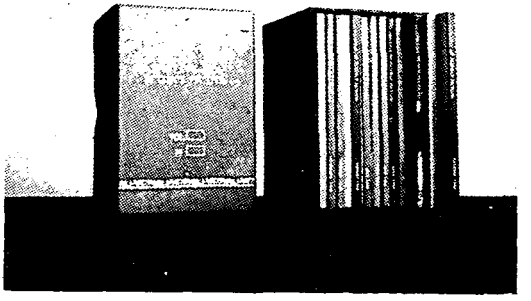
Cooney and the sheriff went for their pistols in the same split instant. I had my eye on Cooney. His hand hooked and stabbed for his hip.

His *left* hand!

It slammed down for the gun that wasn't there. He was still scrabbling at his empty hip when the bullet blew him off his feet. He'd practiced so much with his left that when it come time to draw he couldn't help himself.

He didn't die right off. They got him up on the bar, and the doctor hustled in with his little black bag. One look at Cooney's smashed shoulder, and he got out his bone saw. It was either take off Cooney's right arm at the shoulder or watch him die right there.

I listened to the noises Cooney was making and was sick. I took as much as I could; then I went outside and watched a lone hawk circling in the sky over Tensleep.



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Hilbert Schenck is professor of mechanical engineering and director of the ocean engineering program at the University of Rhode Island. He has contributed a short story, "Tomorrow's Weather," and several poems to F&SF and here offers a fascinating story in which Dr. Bernard Franklin, professor of oceanography, presides over the death of all the world's oceans.

Three Days at The End of The World

by HILBERT SCHENCK

The First Day

The research vessel *William Scoresby* lies at the main dock of the ocean campus on a falling tide. On this sunny October morning the wind blows gently from the north, and the bay and sky are brilliant, transparent with that dark blue of the New England fall. At night the bay and coast will wink with lights and pinpoint colors in the sharp, dry air. Leaning on the rail of the well deck, I am tensely awaiting the completion of repairs on the big profiler, that essential acoustic searchlight that prints with tiny sparks the nature of the sediments and water miles beneath the keel.

I feel... hard to describe my almost unbearable anticipation, the tight knot of impatience, and some fear, I confess, yet an exhaltation too. Feelings seldom met in my profession, yet not completely unfamiliar. I have felt this heightened sense before... here, two years past on that last, angry night when my wife left, forever, to her teaching job in Michigan... a few times, not quite the same perhaps, when I overdid on grass. (My heedless, careless children have dealt with me so casually, but they did turn me on and occasionally will deign to buy me a little.) I find that occasionally a strong grass trip will produce a kind of artificial anticipation, a sense of impending... something... and I feel, like today, overcome with a formless restlessness.

Yet I am certainly an appropriate person to preside over one of the ends of our world. A Distinguished Professor of Oceanography, winner of the Humboldt Medal, discoverer of the Franklin Projection, a method of extrapolating synoptic data to predict future trends... and named for me. (Next month I will be made a Fellow of the American Meteorological Society.)

Out beyond Long Island, well

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offshore beyond the shelf where the water plunges to black and quiet ooze, there lies a source of infection, a deadly place of death and... yes... sin. That is certainly what we seek in our small vessel, the legacy of an act of sin. When my wife left me, shouting on that final bitter night, she surely saw me as a great sinner. "Your only love is for things of death!" she had grated at me, her teeth a hard line, her eyes bright and full of hatred. Perhaps she had a point. I was born too late to make the great discoveries, the exciting leaps of intuition and intellect that Scoresby and Humboldt and the others made with their slow and dangerous ships and their crude devices fashioned of wood and bone. And, yet, that isn't quite right. They are as much a part of what is happening as I am. All our works lead to this point in the history of the North Atlantic Basin. How could we have prevented it? Once humans gained the ability to influence the total activity of the earth, our eventual sin was inevitable. My casual children would dismiss this voyage as only another death trip.

Listen! I have had a fine education! I was forced to take courses to prepare me for the end of the world. They were mainly in the Department of English Literature at a small and rich liberal arts college in southern Vermont. For though I majored in physics there, we were not expected to regard ourselves as professionals. That all came later, in the law, medical, and scientific schools where facts flooded the academic day. At Wilston College we were to become full men, men who could apply the humanities to the difficult job of running the world. It's easy to see now that those few decent professors in the humanities courses were shoveling shit against the tide. The Wilston system was too chancy, too casual. America is governed by graduates of Wilston, their humanities seminars long forgotten or ignored. The CIA chiefs, the slumlords, the robber barons of oil and profits, the cynical politicians, all too many from the Wilstons of America.

Me too. I must stop trying to escape from this guilt, large and terrible as it is. I could have spoken two years ago and I did not. I certainly could have spoken last spring, after the second cruise, but I did not have the strength of the source. I *had* to have another set of points. My professional cleverness has always been in the interpretation of data. I had to get more solid facts, cold and terrible to flog them with, all those noted and important Wilston grads. And we are, after all, old boys together. I have friends in the Office of the Oceanographer of the Navy, at Scrips and Woods Hole, where weapons and environ-

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mental research go hand in hand, where manipulation of the seas is the goal and where life and death are so intermixed that no full professor can tell them apart. I hated my wife when she tore at me with her half-baked, rad-lib crap, but there is some truth in her people's anger. If only they weren't so weak and doctrinaire and uninformed.

I took a course in modern poetry at Wilston. (Part of my "humanities distribution" requirement. This university still has such things today.) It was the best course I've ever taken. The professor was a cheerful, red-faced drunk, given to reading poems in a resonant, slightly hoarse voice. He was the only undergraduate teacher I ever had who treated me exactly as an equal human being of exactly equal worth and with ideas of exactly the same importance as his own. I was an honor student, clever, articulate, hating the humanities as vague, stupid and disorganized. Looking back, I see that he really loved us all, and especially the thorny, noisy, clever ones. Did he really believe that we would behave better in the Pentagon or the Department of State because he had read us poetry?

My undergraduate days came after World War II, a time when the world's end was a lively topic. On one remarkable day, Professor Feingold was plowing cheerfully through T.S. Eliot and had spent some minutes comparing Eliot's end-of-the-world ("not with a bang but a whimper") with that of Robert Frost ("fire and ice").

I hated Eliot. I thought him exactly the kind of poet Wilston professors would like; effete, delicate, upper class, gently antisemitic. "I think the bang and whimper poem is the most self-indulgent baloney in the book." I spoke firmly. Feingold grinned. He loved to argue.

"Yes, you certainly don't take to old T.S., Mr. Franklin. You find him faggy, I suppose?" That was a pretty tough start. We were, after all, upper-middle-class sophisticates and supposedly above making value judgments on a man's sexual preferences. But he was only cooling me off.

"Not that," I said more slowly. "I just find the idea that the world is coming to an end because a girl screws before she's married and some Jews own property instead of people in the Church of England... well, it's all just ridiculous!" A murmur of assent swept over the class. I was winning!

Feingold didn't seem to know it. "Ah," he said briskly. "Eliot is talking about individual moral decay with, I confess, some unattractive examples thrown in. Do you think that moral decay is an inadequate image to project the end of the world?"

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"It *is* inadequate. The Greeks collapsed after the Peloponnesian Wars and the moral decay those caused, and the Romans faded after four hundred years of all kinds of moral decay. The world still hasn't ended in either place."

"Let me give you two thoughts." Feingold shook his fingers at the class. "In our world, the world of atomic bombs, moral decay might actually lead to a real end of the world. That is, a real, scientifically possible end of the world. Secondly, the world ends for each man when he dies. I'm assuming you don't believe in ghosts or reincarnation. What Eliot may be saying is that when a man dies in a state of moral corruption, his death is a whimper rather than a bang. You mention Greece and Rome. I think they both rather prove my point. They did, both of them, end with rather a whimper. Greece providing the tutors and hired brains of imperial Rome, which, if I remember correctly, sort of faded away four hundred years later when the barbarians wandered in from the woods."

"All right," I said. "I'll grant that the physical destruction of life on earth might be regarded as an act of moral decay...."

"*Might!*" shouted Feingold, his voice steady and powerful. "*Might* be regarded as an act of moral decay! Why, don't you see that the suicide of the race is the final, the ultimate culmination of all our moral collapses; the endless butchery of serfs and soldiers, the Flanders trenches, the death camps, Hiroshima. That would be the final and greatest act of evil ever consummated, the total triumph of hate and death!" He grinned again. "Sorry to interrupt. You say you grant my first point. Fine. Let's go on to the second."

I never got sore with Feingold, but I didn't want to let him get away with all that vague and emotional hokum. "I *don't* grant your first point, as a matter of fact. A nuclear war is one thing, an accident is another. Suppose our excessive use of combustion changes the climate so that we can no longer exist. That would be stupid as Hell, but I don't see it as an act of complete depravity."

Feingold made an elaborate shrug to the class and held his hands palms up. "*Exactly* Eliot's point. Stupid. Chicks giving it away to anyone. Slumlords gouging. Little guys dying in meaningless campaigns in odd corners of the world. Stupid people doing stupid things. Driving their cars to nowheres to pass empty days of boredom and polluting the air as they go. How much of a whimper do you want?" The class snickered. He had dragged me one hundred and eighty degrees around to some kind of acceptance of the poem's ideas.

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I never won with Feingold, but I actually liked the way he pulled his switcheroos and swamped you in a mud bath of rhetoric. "Let's get to the second idea," I doggedly plugged ahead. "The idea of individual death as the end of the world. I might actually participate in the end of the physical world and yet find it a moral and heroic experience."

Feingold peered at me in a very alert way. And as I look back on that class now, what he said next seems very wonderful and prophetic. He said, "Yes, you might. I doubt that I'll participate in the end of the world," (He didn't. He died of liver failure in 1967.) "but you may be there. And... yes, you might even stage-manage some of the proceedings. And if you do, remember Eliot's ideas of style. Give the rest of us a classy end. And a dignified end. Elegant, with lectures and slides." Now he was kidding me again, but I could deal with that OK.

"I should think you'd be a fan of rage and struggle." And, raising my hand, I intoned a line from my favorite poet in that course, Dylan Thomas. "Rage against the falling of the night."

Feingold was delighted. He beamed. "Ah ... of course! But that is a poet's reaction, not a scientist's. You probably think the great idea wars today are between the sciences and the humanities. Not so. You people are only the handmaidens of the historians and economists, the people who think in aggregates, in statistical processes. The technicians are only resident wizards, employees of social scientists. Veblen understood this. You are children with magical hands. The great ideological wars of the future will be between poets and historians. The one talking only of individuals, the other only of large groups and large policies. Wilfred Owen versus General Haig. Well, we all know who will win, don't we? But the fight is worth making anyhow. That's all Thomas said. Acting, fighting, is the core of life even if the end is not attainable."

So that was how classes went in English Lit 456 (Modern Poetry: 1900 to the present). Not much preparation for our voyage on R/V *William Scoresby,* but something to be grateful for, I suppose. I wish Professor Feingold were here now with his glib tricks and his moon face. With him watching, I think I might do it better. I would not, in any case, be lonely. Anyway, he was my friend. I wish I had told him that sometime. I hope he knew.

Marty Balder, leading ocean tech, is at my elbow. "Sparker's working again. I think it'll be OK. Anyway, Jill is going along and she can hack whatever might come up." I nod. Jill is a steady, capable

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tech, one of the spin-offs of equal-opportunity hiring. "Marty, are the Van Dorns OK? And the oxygen sensors?"

"All checked," he says briskly. "Have a good trip."

We have lost two hours and will not be on station until almost midnight. I walk rapidly forward to the wet lab on the well deck where the nearest intercom is located.

"Bridge? Wet lab."

The chief mate answers. "Bridge, aye."

"We're ready to steam, Jim."

"Aye, aye, Perfesser Franklin," and a moment later the air whistle shrieks over the quiet campus. On shore, a group of my undergraduates hastily take leave of two girls fetchingly dressed for tide-pool specimen collecting and chase, shouting, up the gangway. The campus cops muster to handle the lines and gangway, the engines rev, and in moments we are backing off from the pier, a few persons waving as our flags snap briskly in the wind. I am so tense! I will check the Van Dorns myself. I will calibrate the oxygen equipment. I will prepare the clamshell dredge and specimen bottles. I have many hours of steaming to fill with work.

The *Scoresby* is the smaller of the two ocean-going vessels operated by the university. She is one hundred and eighty feet long and began life as a Navy coastal freighter working the Japan-Korea run during that long-ago war. The director of the lab named her for a Scottish whaling captain and amateur oceanographer, Fellow of the Royal Society, and Doctor of Divinity. The director's main interests are cetology and fish acoustics, and Scoresby was a big student of whales. I approved of the naming because Scoresby was also an apt experimentalist and owed to no man in his ability to draw general conclusions from specific observations. My thing too.

My last run on *Scoresby* was in the spring, another two-day outing beyond the shelf, well east of Long Island. Normally I don't make offshore cruises in the fall with the undergrads, but after looking at the spring data, I knew we could not wait another year. So I went to the ship committee and fought for these two days to be taken out of a one-week refit period and, in the end with the director backing my phoney, academic reasons, got the time over the dead body of the marine superintendent. There are advantages to being the star in the director's crown, but of course I will pay the next time ship or government-surplus favors are handed out. Funny how I keep assuming things will be the same when we return. How will the director deal with all of this? I cannot foresee it.

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We are plowing a straight course a little south of east. The sea is brilliant and the day so bright your eyes ache from looking at the horizon. The wind is dropping and we will have a perfect night. None of my undergraduates are seasick, an unusual situation. They loll chatting about the deck sucking on soft drinks from the machine in the wardroom. I should take a nap in my cabin but know that would be hopeless. I have had the Van Dorn water samplers modified so that we can get dissolved oxygen without draining them first. I ask Jill and Harry Harvey, my assistant and doctoral student, to help me check each one with surface water. I am brusque, professional, fatherly. Do they know that things are amiss, that I am wound as tight as tangled B/T wire? Probably Harry does. He has known me two years. Also, he is as smart as I am and has the added quickness of the young.

Finally the loud speakers announce dinner and we straggle below. An oceanographic vessel shares at least one characteristic with all tourist ships, the essential need for large amounts of good food served often. One is either sick or ravenous on these cruises, and the undergrads, crowding into the tiny dining room, grin cheerfully at the huge platters of fried chicken on the galley stove. My students, our tech, and some of the crew share tiny four-and six-person tables, but at the corner table only two of us may sit in slightly more comfortable chairs emblazoned with *Captain* and *Chief Scientist* on their backs. This is an essential arrangement. If the captain and chief scientist are not forced to deal socially with each other several times a day, the voyage may turn to feuds and duels from which flow only missed stations and lost gear.

I sit alone, waiting with some anticipation the appearance of my table mate, another and certainly our ultimate example of equal opportunity: Olga Petersen, master.

A child in Sweden, she came with relatives to the U.S., where she grew up and married a young ship's officer. Rather than sit home waiting for him, she studied and passed her third-mate's exams, and they then sought assignments to the same ship. Her last berth before this one was as first on an oil-field supply vessel out of Perth, Scotland. Her husband was master. They were out in the January smother of the North Sea trying to resupply a rig when the big wave came, one of those freaks that appear now and then. It caught the vessel maneuvering at the edge of the landing platform. Petersen saw it coming and went hard astern and he was backing well but the monster just picked up the ship and surfed it into the landing stage and rig

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struts. The pilot house was sliced off with Petersen inside while his wife and the docking party were creamed up against the deck house when the ship decelerated and all the water came aboard. They sank in moments. Olga Petersen was the only survivor. She already had masters papers, and so when this job was advertised, in she came. A tough broad, I thought, when *that* story went around.

The first cruise she captained for us was the director's annual pilgrimage north to fuss with the whales at the edge of the pack. The weather blew all to Hell and *Scoreby* took a tremendous flogging. At the storm's height the director broke his ankle in a fall down a ladder, and *Scoresby* wound up rescuing a research vessel from the U of Miami. Anyway, I was having lunch with the director soon after his return, he surrounded by his crutches and his big white foot up on a stool for, I thought to myself, people to kiss. Up came our publicist in his plaid trews and large grin to slap the director's shoulder. "Bad luck about your foot. The whole thing sounds terrible. What happened? Was the captain having her period?"

The director's eyes narrowed. "Bill, Captain Petersen is the ablest officer this school has ever had. She has rough-water ability I couldn't believe. And she saved our asses up there. She's tough. She'd boil your balls for breakfast, Bill!"

This was the director's macho or he-man side, seen mainly with admirals and the humanities faculty. He spoke loudly to make his point, and I never heard another crack about our lady captain after that. But I couldn't bear letting the director, no fan of women's lib, get off quite so easy. "Sounds like you're ready to lobby for the equal rights amendment?" I tried not to smile.

The director refused this bait. "Perhaps I am for it," he muttered. "That woman saved my life. She steered through Hell and we weren't hurt. And when we came up on that Miami boat! What a mess! A-frame over the side and slamming on every roll, a thud you could hear for miles. Mast and booms down, a twenty-degree list. We would have looked like that or worse if she hadn't piloted."

"Too bad she wasn't steering when the big wave hit in the North Sea."

The director shook his head. "When that big one comes, there's no fighting it. Maybe in the open with room to maneuver, but that close to a rig they had no chance."

"Good evening, Dr. Franklin."

I look up. She is just sitting down, a woman less bulky than I had imagined but tall and sturdy, dressed in neat khakis with her

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shirt neck open. Her sleeves are rolled to elbows and I see muscled, sunburned arms. Yet the wrists are womanly, small, the hands quite graceful. Her smile is wide and pleasant.

"Hello, Captain." I rise halfway and then sit, wondering if I should have risen at all. Captain Petersen nods cheerfully to acknowledge my courtesy with the friendliest of looks.

"What fine weather for your cruise," she says. "We're making wonderful time. I think we may reach your first station a little after twenty-hundred hours."

"Terrific!" She certainly can crowd this old bucket. "I was sorry to miss you Saturday." (Yesterday I had given my station list and research plan to the chief mate, the captain being off the ship.)

"Yes, I had to see the yard boss about our refit," she replies. I wonder if this is a slight needle about my stealing two days from the lay-up period. I look at her face closely but see only the most cheerful and open expression. Her sharp blue eyes are softened by her blond, short hair and light but full eyebrows. But at the corners are the spiderweb lines from long work on the bridges of ships, the brown tightness of the sea person. She seems very professional, a capable skipper. She looks like the person who did what the director said. Except she is not... tough. Rather, controlled, I think. In charge of events. Tough does not connote the smartness I see.

"I hope these two days are not messing up your yard business."

She smiles so warmly! "Dr. Franklin, the yard has ample time to complete its work, starting Tuesday, I told the ship committee that when they asked."

Our masses of fried chicken, French fries, fried tomatoes, and fried zucchini arrive and we begin to eat. The food is greasy and delicious. A quiet falls on the dining room. "Is this a particularly interesting area we're going to?" she asks. "You've been here before?"

I look up, startled. "Well... yes... it has some interest. How did you know I was out here before?"

She laughs in a most open way. She is certainly as cheerful a captain as I have ever met. "I'm a snooper when it comes to chief scientists," she says. "I consult the logs of past cruises. Then I know what to expect. I read about the director's past cruises into the pack ice. That helped me to understand the director. And that helped me to help him."

Now I laugh. "And you discovered that the director is as mean as a treed wolverine, as cussed as a Model T in the rain, and as unpredictable as a rattler under the bed?"

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Off she goes laughing again. She is so jolly! "The director is a bold and resourceful man," she says finally. "And I know you and he are old associates. You are the only one he sees as an equal, and I think you may regard him so as well."

That is certainly both an astute and a gracious thing to say. "I think I can run a better experiment than the director," I reply, "but I could never match his style. He's one of the top two or three bigshots in ocean-science administration in the world, and he's up there playing old Bill Scoresby in the pack ice, risking his neck and having the time of his life. I can just imagine his satisfaction when you took that Miami wreck in tow."

She shakes her hair back and laughs again. "His first signal was, 'This will cost you guys four martinis at the next acoustics bash.' We had to tie him into a chair on the bridge, the swells were still heavy."

But a new idea strikes me. "And what did you discover from the logs of my cruises?" Suddenly, I wonder very much what she will say.

She smiles only a little. "Well, you are kindly but perhaps impatient. You improvise beautifully. You are not known to ever make a mistake."

I am shaken. "Captain Petersen, the night my wife left me, she said that same thing. When you just said it, it sounded like a blessing. When my wife said it, it became a curse." That is a scene I don't like to recall. The tenseness had flowed away, talking to this handsome woman, but remembering that evening, I feel my stomach tight and knotted once more.

She nods. "Never making mistakes can be a curse. It seems to affront those who do. It is an affront that grows with time."

I must be looking very woebegone, for she suddenly rises and half takes, half shakes my hand. "Thank you for an interesting dinner, Dr. Franklin. And don't worry about being too capable. We professionals must stick together, you and the director, me, a few others. We are a precious few, Dr. Franklin, a band of brothers."

That seems to me a very warm and generous parting and I suddenly feel better. I think about her and her husband, backing down on that great wave, and I can see none of that terrible agony in her round and open face. But she is a very controlled person. A very private person. I like our captain. I want us to be friends.

At twenty twenty-three we slow and stop, rolling only slightly on a calm and moonlit sea. I decide to pull a Van Dorn string first. The profiler shows a good gooey bottom, but I want to establish our location

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within the affected zone before we get a chunk of sediment. I leave Harry Harvey and the undergrads with the winch and samplers on deck while Jill and I watch the descent on the big profiler in the below-decks electronics lab. I always use an acoustic target end-weight when sampling in water this deep so that I can track the end of the string in relation to the bottom. Down goes the echo, the sparks running along the paper and smelling like old streetcars in the rain. As the string descends, we see the echo pause as they splice on new sampling bottles every few hundred feet. "Pretty close," says Jill finally, turning to look at me.

I punch the intercom button. "Ah ... well deck this is profiler." I squint at the papermarks. "We only have two hundred feet of clearance left. Don't put this last sampler deeper than fifty feet and then shoot the works."

I leave Jill to watch the retrieval on the sparker and climb to the well deck. The first messenger weight has gone down and, hopefully, is shutting the top bottle and setting free the next messenger which will close the second unit, and so on down the string. On the first sampler I have added a spring-deployed acoustic target which will tell us if the entire closure sequence is complete. We wait, imagining the lead messengers hurtling down the line into the dark. "Bottom sampler closed," says Jill over the speaker. "A perfect run!"

I think: We don't have them back yet, sweetie. But the line is running onto the winch, and the first sampler comes up the side of the ship and over the rail. Harry Harvey and an undergrad open the little door I have added and pop in the oxygen sensor. There must be no chance of contamination with surface oxygen. Harry sets the meter and peers at the dial. There is a pause.

"Shit!" he says suddenly. "Something's wrong. Less than two parts per million." Suddenly the deck is very quiet. Everybody has turned and is looking at me. Everybody knows that this is about half the expected surface value out here. Everybody now knows that the old data freak, the "ocean fox" (yes, they called me that when they gave me the Humboldt medal) is onto something heavy. Harry is blinking nervously at me.

I think: Relax kids, it's only the fucking end of the world. I had planned this station to be just outside the infected region, and instead we are deep within it. Either the spreading rate is much greater than I predicted, or ... and this "or" is much scarier ... the source strength is so great, so overwhelming, that the gradient from the center is an order of magnitude

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more than I found last spring. I must change the entire plan, estimate new stations. I was going to work inward along a radius line; now I must work outwards. I must plan new intervals, but I cannot project until we get another station. My thoughts begin to unravel a little. We only have twelve or so hours for this. Jesus Christ! They are all standing around me, the moon bright, the water soft and calm. The stars are sharp points over the great bowl of water of which we are the center. I must go to the bridge with a new station. I must get my special chart, the chart only I have seen that shows the source location and the oxygen isopleths from the other cruises.

"For Christ's sake!" I suddenly shout at them. "Get the rest of the string aboard! Get off your asses! We've got much more to do than I thought! Move!" Guiltily they start from their reverie and the deck work begins again. I duck into the forward chart room off the wet lab and lean over the big drafting table, staring at my map. I suddenly think: Perhaps we have a position error. Even if we were ten miles south of where we thought, that would make quite a difference. I call the bridge. Captain Petersen answers immediately.

"Could you give me a present position, Captain?"

"Just a moment," and then she is back reading off the numbers. My mind is in something of a turmoil. I find it difficult to concentrate on a plot of the position. But when I do, I see we are right at the desired location.

"Listen ... ah ... Captain. Can you estimate a position error for me? We've run into something ... ah, odd. I need to be sure ...."

She interrupts my maunderings. "The circle of confusion is five yards, Dr. Franklin." Clear, impersonal.

I shake my head. I've got to control myself. "Listen, you mean to tell me you can get to within *five yards* with Loran B?" I am shouting. I must not be so abusive!

"We're locked on the satellites, Dr. Franklin. And we're getting confirming triangulation from the Montauk - Bar Harbor - Bermuda range on the long-wave, slave-master system."

I am flabbergasted. "You ... you mean our satellite system is finally, actually working? I didn't know that."

Even over the scratchy intercom her laughter is pleasant. "I felt we had to have it for the director's arctic cruise. The Loran crossings are very oblique up there."

God, this woman is a marvel! Four years and two captains had passed, and nobody had been able to get sensible data from our satellite navigation system. And in a

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month or so, she .... "Is this the correct position, Professor, the one you wanted?"

"Yes, yes," I say. "Look, I'll be right up. We've got to change the station plan. Everything is changed ..." and I stare at my chart and wonder how to select the next station. Best to steam out on a radius, but how far? Make a guess? Extrapolation projection? Screw it! I decide to guess. To try twenty miles and see. I mark my chart, roll it up, and leave the chart room. On the well deck they now have six of the right samplers back aboard. I look over Harry Harvey's shoulder at the data sheet. No mistake on that first one. At depth the oxgyen is down to almost nothing. Bad! Bad! God, that source is strong! Unbelievable!

"When you get the string back," I say, "we'll grab a bottom sample, just one. Right here. And then secure the big winch. We don't have time for any more on this cruise. Now, Harry, when you pack the goo into the baggies, be sure everybody wears rubber gloves. I don't want anyone touching the sediment with bare hands. Sluice the deck and the grabber at once after you get enough samples out of the claws."

Harry says nothing, but a big rangy Southerner, an older undergrad who came to us from a N.O.A.A. tech job shrugs. "Ah sure never heard of that," he says. "You claimin' the dirt is poison or somethin'?"

"God damn it!" I shouted. "I don't want any stupid arguments. Either do what is told or get the shit off the deck! And let's speed this up. You people must think this is some kind of moonlight cruise."

Well, they hop to after that. Boy, I'm not doing this very well! Professor Feingold would not be impressed. Why should I crap on these kids? They didn't put it down there.

I climb the bridge ladder and find Captain Petersen on the port wing pensively sipping coffee and staring out at the moon's brilliant track. "Ah, Professor Franklin, can I give you some coffee?"

Can she? "God, you bet!" She has heard me cursing at the students. I sigh. I suck on the cup she hands me. We are in the navigation space at the back of the wheelhouse. "Well," I say quietly, "we'll have to scrap the station list I gave the chief mate. I want to make the selection station by station. Our next stop will then be *here*," and I unroll my chart and indicate the guessed location. She leans over the chart next to me and writes down the coordinates on a pad. She must see my lines of constant oxygen and

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the location of the source, but she says nothing.

I return to the deck as the grab sampler is lifting over the side, back from its trip to the bottom, its jaw spewing mud and water in a swinging arc. "Looks like a good catch," says Harry as the grabber clunks down on deck. Carefully, in rubber gloves, they scoop the mud and detritus into plastic bags. I should have grabbed a sample last spring but the gear was on the other vessel. We will refrigerate this dirt and give it to the soil chemists later. I watch them hose down afterwards. Whatever is in the sediment is potent. It might kill people as well as diatoms.

We steam north and drop the Van Dorns again. Oxygen higher, but we're still inside the infected zone. I make a quick projection, and at three in the morning we get surface oxygen about where it should be, forty-five miles further out on the radius line than I expected. I send Harry and some of the undergrads to bed. Jill and the tall Southern boy are working the Van Dorns like machines. I chase between the profiler and winch man. The sample bottles, filled with water from the Van Dorns, are crowding one shelf of the fridge. I decide at four to run a two-hour circumferential track and then come south on another radius. "Our next station won't be until after six," I tell my silent crew. "Why don't you all catch a few winks?" As they turn to go, I cock my head at the Southern boy. "Ah, son, sorry about that temper tantrum. Your question was reasonable. My response wasn't."

He stops and grins back in the dim lights of the well deck. "Hell, Perfesser, say any damn thing you want. Damn, you've led us onto something. I can see that. I don't care if you cuss me steady for a day. You've put us in the middle of something big. And on a shit-ass undergraduate cruise too. Wee-ooo," and he shakes his head. "Why it's like drawing three cards into the middle of a straight flush."

Why should people be nice to me when I treat them badly? Why am I keeping this all so secret? Grandstanding? And, yet, I must be sure! "Look," I say finally, "this *is* pretty big. You're right. We're dealing with oxygen death on a tremendous scale."

He nods. "The North Atlantic? All of it?"

"I don't know. Perhaps."

He goes on. "Worse than that? All the oceans?"

I can't think about that yet. "I don't know," I say. "Please go to bed. I have calculations to make before the next stations."

"Jesus!" he says softly. "Jesus H. Cheerist!"

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The Second Day

At six forty, a gorgeous bright morning with the wind a little brisker, we are making our first station on the new radius line. All the students are up and working, eyes bright, faces tense. I know the Southern boy has passed on what I told him, for they are sober and do not joke any more. They are thinking, each to himself: We are the most important people in the world doing the most important thing in the world.

And I am the most exhausted oceanographer in the world. I have spent the past two hours estimating stations, using my projection method to space our data properly as we cruise south again. Dealing with the day ahead seems impossible. And in the midst of putting down the sampler string, the chief mate announces breakfast. Shit! I tell the students and winch man to continue and walk into the wet lab. "Jim, my gang will have to go to second sitting. And you'll have to leave us a winch man too."

"Gee, Dr. Franklin, cookie won't like that. I can hold this station for you until your bunch gets fed. No problem."

Something pops in my skull. "Look, Mr. Mate, we're fucking well not wasting an hour at this station to please the cook! You can damn well get some off-duty people to go in and eat now! We'll be in when we get these samplers up and not before!"

Well, that tears it all right. Why didn't I send Harry in to pass a message? I'm really unglued. Terrible to act like that with the mate ... and to let the crew hear it too. The loudspeaker is silent, reproaching me. Then her voice comes on the box. "Professor Franklin, work your station. We'll fit around you on the meals." How gently and graciously she says that. And how much worse I feel when she does.

"Sorry, Captain," I mumble. "Long night. I'm slipping my marbles ...."

And an hour later I sit, sodden with fatigue and guilt, at my tiny table under the sullen gaze of the steward and the cook. But then she is there, daintily unfolding her napkin and smiling as pleasantly as though we were lunching at the faculty club. I try to smile back and poke at my mass of eggs and the accompanying rasher of bacon, itself sloppy with syrup from a gigantic mass of flapjacks. I feel sick.

"Please, Dr. Franklin," and she still looks at me in a very friendly way. "The mate should not have said that. The idea, after all, is to get your data."

I stare at the huge platter of food. "What I said was worse than what the mate said," I mutter.

Very naturally and warmly she

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takes my hand again. "Dr. Franklin, I think you should try to rest, for a few hours anyway. Harry Harvey is a very capable young man and he can ...."

I stare at her. My eyes must be completely red. "I don't think I could sleep ...."

"Of course you can sleep. You're exhausted," and she briskly turns to the kitchen. "Steward, take away Dr. Franklin's coffee and get him some weak cocoa." She turns back to me, speaking in a low voice. "Whatever is happening, Dr. Franklin, you should let Harry be a part of it. He is very proud of being your student, and the reason he became your student is because he knows that you are at the center of important events."

I am too zonked for this. Tears start to my eyes. "Captain," and I am whispering so that my voice won't break, "we are finding the oxygen death of the North Atlantic, perhaps of the world oceans. I simply can't ... entrust ...."

She is looking at me closely, shaking her head. "No ... no ... all the more reason to let the human things have priority. Give Harry his morning. Let him be in charge." She is looking at me intently. "Tomorrow all this must come out. You ... you and the director will have to deal with it then. You *must* be ready. You *must* sleep!"

How does she know all this? She is saying what old Feingold would have said, about the human things, about behaving with style. "Yes, you're right." I turn and see Harry watching me from across the room. I beckon him over.

"Harry, I'm going to sack in till noon. I've projected the next group of stations on a chart in the forward chart room. Plug ahead. Try to do as many as you can. Be quick. Be sure to wake me at noon, or before if the readings are looking really different from the other group. OK?"

Harry sticks up his thumb. "You bet! We'll go like the wind."

I cannot eat my breakfast. I rise unsteadily. "Thanks, Captain Petersen," I croak. I wonder blearily what the crew is thinking about all this. But, who cares? They will know soon enough.

The chief scientist's cabin is a small but private place. The students sleep in four- and eight-bed cabins, but the chief scientist has a tiny nest. I close the light-tight shade, roll onto the narrow bunk and, as she predicted, am gone in moments. And I dream.

At first it is pleasant. I am with my wife again. We are young and on a great beach that stretches as far as the eye can see in either direction. We are both looking for a private place to make love, and though we don't speak, I know she is thinking of this just as I am

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thinking of it. But the beach is open dunes. There is no grass or shade and no private place. The dunes are hot and we are becoming tired and thirsty. And now the beach smells badly, and my wife, her breasts visible and desirable under a tiny bikini top, scowls at me. We walk in the backwash of the waves to keep cool, but the water is hot and does not seem as wet as it should be. It is almost like a sandy fluid burning our feet, and now there are things turning over and over in the hot surf, and I see they are rotted things. I am hot and my wife has turned on me and her face contorts and her lower lip juts. She spits spittle at me with words I cannot hear but the words are "Death! Death!" Then I turn to the sea and the waves are huge and hot, moving so languidly, now filled with shocking shapes and pieces of creatures. I try to run back from these lazy, terrible waves and the corrupt things that lump out of their smooth forms but the water drags on the feet and the heat is unbearable! My wife spits "Death! Death!" The great filthy seas are rolling in stinking of corruption and I cannot move back now. I raise my hands and try to scream but it is all soundless! Yes I must ... get ... back ... or —

I throw myself upright in my bunk, soaking with sweat, a shriek in my throat, and Harry is gently rapping at my cabin door. "Noon, Professor, noon ..." he is calling ... calling.

"Thanks, Harry, I'll be right out." I am drenched and disoriented. If only I weren't so lonely. I am undone. And I suddenly think: I am the messenger of defeat. They will destroy me! I put my head under the sink faucet and the water runs. And as that cooling sense spreads, I suddenly stand up straight. "Shit," I say aloud. "I'm whimpering! Fuck T. S. Eliot!" And I am again myself, some sort of living testimonial to a liberal arts education.

Harry has done beautifully while I nightmared away the morning. Two stations complete and the third in progress. I am still shaken but try to be pleasant with all the people I have dumped on. The Van Dorns are coming up, and Harry catches my eye and cocks his head toward the forward chart room. "Want to come look at the chart, Prof?" he says. We go into the little room off the wet lab, and now there are two charts on the big tilted board. My chart has some additions, but next to it is a larger sheet, a North Atlantic Basin sketch map. And on this I see much activity, what look to be isopleths all the way to the Arctic Circle. I point to the most northward line.

"What's that?"

Harry grins. "Two parts per

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million D.O. line." He points to the number 11.4 written next to it. "Eleven point four years to reach that point."

"From when?"

Harry looks sideways at me. "From the start of the spread."

"How did you find that point in time?"

He points to a much smaller oval. "Back projection. Here we are today." The number on this line is 2.4. "Acoording to what you've got so far, this spread started two point four years ago."

"Very good. Perfect. You're right on the button."

He looks sharply at me now. "You know when this started, then?"

"Yes."

Harry is quiet for a moment. I point again at the farthest north line. "Will it actually depress to this D.O. level?" I ask him, holding my breath.

He shrugs. "I don't know the source strength. That two-dimensional Franklin projection," and he grins as he says my name, "is only based on the time series. It assumes an infinite source strength."

"Harry," I say tensely, "you can get the strength in terms of the rate, the derivative. Remember Corollary Three in my second paper?"

Harry jerks his head down sharply. "Shit! I was trying to think of a way ... of course that's it. God damn! I thought I really knew your stuff backwards and forwards." He seems so disappointed that I suddenly put my arm around his shoulders.

"Hey, buddy. You've done about five times as much as I could have if I did nothing but this all morning. Let's get that strength now, together. We may need to prop each other up when we see what comes out."

Harry picks up his portable computer and strokes the keys. He seems cheered up in an instant. "OK, OK. Let me look at this program sheet again." And soon he is poking and writing and poking keys again. I let him work. His nerves are better than mine. It would take me six tries on that electronic toy to get the same answer twice at this point.

Suddenly he puts down the machine and sits back, staring at me, his eyes wide. "Professor Franklin, the source *is* infinite ... or as close as I can tell. There's absolutely no sign of decay. That coefficient has three zeros behind the decimal. The depletion coefficient is even smaller." He stares at the sheets, the charts, at me again. "Holy shit ...." his eyes are wide and he seems to be seeing me for the first time. "This is ..." he runs his hands through his hair. "Why ... why ... this is the worst disaster to ever ... and you predicted it!" He

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stops and grabs my arm. "We were at the Atlantic Basin conference last winter in New York. Not a mention of this. Nobody knew. Good God! How did ... how could ...?" His eyes are staring and he grips my arm tighter.

If Harry were an undergraduate, this would not bother him so much. He would regard me as just one more wizard-professor pulling one more analytic rabbit out of the advanced math hat. But Harry *knows* what is possible with projection and sampling. And he also knows that I have come three times exactly to this spot, starting within one year of the actual beginning of the infection. And those two knowings are not compatible ... unless I am a true wizard using methods not known to other scientists ... or else the luckiest station picker in the history of oceanography. And, in fact, I *have* been drawing on methods outside of science, but not magical ones. Nothing more complicated than good old shop gossip.

"Harry ... Harry, close the door and I'll tell you all." Actually I do not tell him quite all. I do not tell, for instance, that Fred Kenyon and I were zapped on some super hash in a hospitality suite at that All-Oceans conference in Miami, when he told me this story.

Harry sits down again, pushes the door closed and then pulls down a dog to hold it. "This is what Professor Fred Kenyon told me at a Miami conference two years ago," I begin. "Do you remember the spring that South Vietnam was defeated?" Harry nods, staring at me. "Well, you may remember also that the government was desperate to keep this war going over there a few more months, to forestall the collapse with new money and aid from Congress. At that time I thought, most people thought, that the President and the Pentagon were simply nuts to make such a big deal over pumping money to a totally defeated country which obviously had no chance to come back militarily. But they knew something we didn't. They had a new weapon. They had started developing it, I suppose, at Deitrich or some other germ-chemical weapons lab because the military herbicides didn't really work to strip out the foliage. Remember the "orange" that they sprayed on the trees to open up the jungle to the helio gunships? Well, according to Fred Kenyon, they finally hit on something really wild, a herbicide that could recreate itself in the plants it was poisoning. Fred, he was a biological type, you know, gave me a lot of jazz about virus imprinting and molecular simulation of other chemical forms. The point was, here was a herbicide that turned plants into more herbicide. You had no decay of poison strength because the more the stuff

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got into the ecosystem, the more of it there was."

Harry nods. "The infinite source," he says slowly.

"Yes ... the infinite source." A quiet lies between us for a long moment. I continue. "They got this thing and tested it. When Vietnam began to fall apart, they cranked up to produce it. Apparently in those last days the government had a ship loaded to go to Vietnam, filled with the goodie and the systems to disperse it."

"We were going in with aircraft again?"

"No need. The South Vietnamese had plenty of planes. We would just show them how to spread the shit. They would fly the missions. Well, anyway, the President and DOD couldn't hold the thing together over there long enough. The vessel actually sailed the day before we began evaucation. At that point, they made a slight mistake ...." Harry's cheekbones are white. "Somebody, or some think-tank, decided this stuff might be handy to stockpile in Europe."

"To spray on the oil sheiks' deserts?" asks Harry, his voice twisted with anger and contempt.

"Kenyon claimed that this stuff had created a real fuss with the war gamers. He referred to it as a 'humane deterrent.' Claimed it has no effect on humans. Apparently they saw this as some kind of intermediate weapon between conventional shoot-'em-up stuff and the big nukes. I suppose they thought it would be a potent threat if Egypt jumped into Israel again."

"And how the fuck were they going to get it out of the Nile, out of the ecosystem after they got it in?", Harry is suddenly shouting in my face.

I put up my hand. "Hey, buddy, hold on! Jesus, don't your think I said the same things to Fred Kenyon?"

"Sorry, Prof."

"Well, you can guess the rest. They diverted the vessel. There was a storm and the ship was run down by her consort, a guided missile cruiser. She lies, not too far away ... there." And I put my finger on the center of Frank's nest of isopleths. "The stuff must be converting the plankton to poison and using oxygen as it goes. Of course there's no renewal, and the normal diffusion processes shift it around. I don't know how high it attacks on the food chain, but of course the fish can't hack it in the low oxygen, and even if they could, their food is dead and sinking into the abyssal depths."

"Contemptibly stupid ass holes!" grits Harry.

"Fred Kenyon assured me that he only found out about this after it happened. But they knew he was a

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good and solid friend of DOD and the Pentagon. So they hired him as a consultant to work over the biological activity of the stuff and make predictions about what was happening at the wreck site. They got the data and samples and Fred did the lab stuff. But old Fred had guilt. He was scared of seeing how it acted in his lab tanks, and I suppose he had to tell somebody outside. I think he picked me because he knew I cruised out here now and then, although he never asked me to do this. Just told me the story and gave me the wreck position. You know the rest of it. I came out here first a year ago last spring, and it was obvious that things were going on in the water column. But the D.O. was only down a part or so, even over the wreck; so I figured the ocean was tougher then Fred's lab tanks. Then last spring things looked worse. More water involved and higher activity. I knew I had to make this fall trip then."

I do not tell Harry other things about my night with Fred Kenyon. How he whimpered in his hash high about guilt and disaster. How I returned to my hotel room and my wife, awake and stiff in her twin bed, the room freezing from the air-conditioner blast. Me, excited from the secret and horny from the hash. My wife, hating me, wanting to hurt me for her wasted years, her subservience to my work and reputation. "You may be a great ocean scientist," she spat at me, "but you're a rotten fuck. You hurt and you rush and you're rough. I always hated it!"

I wept then, sitting facing away from her on my own bed. Because there had been a time, when we were younger on Cape Cod, when she had turned softly to me in passion, when we had joy in each other no matter how clumsily we both expressed it. She needed to remake history, to convince herself that those days had never happened. That I had possesed and ruined her and used up her life out of egoism and carelessness. And of course one doubts one's own memories. There is so much wounding today between men and women.

"Isn't Keyon the one that died in that Carribean accident?"

I jerk out of my reverie and nod. "Yes, the summer after our talk."

"Do you think they killed him?" Harry's voice is cold and twisted.

Funny, that never occurred to me. I suppose I'm really a very establishment figure at heart, the legacy of Wilston College. "Well, I don't see how. That was a real hurricane, after all. I mean, if the CIA can pull off a hurricane at will, we're way beyond paranoia."

Harry stretches and yawns. "Do

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you think the stuff is harmless to people? You had us use the rubber gloves?"

"After what I've told you, do you want to shove your naked pinkies into that black goo?"

Now Harry grins again. "No way!" and a sudden knock comes at the door. "The string must be up. Shall we move to a last station?"

I nod. "You've done great. We have plenty of time for one more, and we'll be in by midnight, making the marine super the happiest man in the world."

As we undog the door, Harry puts his hand on my arm once more. "Professor Franklin, how much of the world's oxygen is generated by the oceans?"

We are silent. Finally I say, "You won't believe this, but I've never looked that up. It's in every basic ocean text. Go to the library room on the second deck."

"No," says Harry. "Let's look that up tomorrow. After we get in. And ... Prof."

I nod.

"The kooks, the eco-freaks, they were right all along, weren't they?"

"Yes," I nod again. "But they will win a bitter victory."

By fourteen hundred we have pulled our last water sampler, and the ship is turned for home. The undergraduates organize the zillion sample bottles, secure the gear, and recalibrate the instruments. Harry and I are closeted in the chartroom looking for mistakes in the various Franklin projections, but by suppertime I am convinced that none exist. The worst of all possible news is in, and we are running on rails toward the TV studios.

At my tiny table that evening all seems to be forgiven. The cookie, far from lounging in his doorway staring daggers at me, presents me with the finest steak in the fridge, done rare and seared perfectly. I am relaxed and savoring the food. My solo part is, in one sense, over, and the next parts will involve the director, the news people, and whatever. But now it is Captain Petersen who is in a state of modest agitation. As soon as we are served and the steward has busied himself at other tables, she leans across and whispers, "Do you know that we are under surveillance by an unmarked aircraft?"

"No. Who?"

"Well," says Captain Petersen, looking at me with raised eyebrows, "I suppose the Navy or the CIA. I've seen these planes before but they are usually shadowing Russian ships."

"Where is it now? I haven't heard an engine."

"They made a flypast after breakfast this morning but we were under way then. They came by

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again in midmorning when your gang was pulling samplers. That probably satisfied them. I watched in the big glasses and they were photographing. I followed them for half an hour. They went out about ten miles, began to climb, and look now to be at over twenty thousand feet and mayby twenty miles to our northeast. Obviously they've been tracking us and getting the position of our stations."

"And they're following us home?"

She nods. "Professor Franklin, can you tell me what is going to happen? Is there a nasty little surprise waiting over the horizon? Are we going to be stopped and boarded?"

"Not a chance," I say firmly, grinning. "The director would *never* allow such a thing!"

She burst out with a gush of laughter. "Between you and the director, this is turning into quite a job!"

"Look, seriously, I don't know at this point what it all means. But to properly answer your question, yes ... I think they might try to stop us." I lower my voice. "The cause of the low oxygen is a secret wreck containing a cargo of a very deadly military herbicide. They must be very worried at the Pentagon. This is going to make Watergate look like a shoplifting caper."

"Professor Franklin, would it be practical to transmit your findings to the lab now ... by radio? I assume they're monitoring our traffic, and such a message would remove their incentive to have a little piracy scene at sea."

I think about that for a moment. "We could ... but I'd rather not. Once this gets into the hands of a radio man ashore ... and who is to say he will copy it exactly right ... we lose control of the thing. It will dribble out through the night by rumor and hearsay, and ..." I look at my watch. "All the bigshots at the lab will be somewhere else now. God knows if we could get through to the director before the news people show up."

She nods. "Then I'll proceed on my plan two. If we see a vessel on the search radar heading in our direction, I will alter course, force him to chase us. If they do that and get within ten minutes of us, perhaps then we should think about using the radio?"

She has conceived the exactly correct response. "Perfect," I say, and we eat a heaping strawberry shortcake in silence. "Why," she says finally, "have we ... we Americans ... done so badly with our leaders? They are so cruel and yet so incompetant at the same time. What is happening to us?"

"Ask the poets," I answer, and we finish in total silence.

At twenty hundred hours the

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intercoms rasp out: "Professor Franklin to the bridge, please." I race up the ladders three steps at a time and burst into the wheel house. Captain Petersen is hunched over the plan-position radar viewer.

"Captain Kidd closing with us?" I say.

"Take a look," she answers, turning away from the indicator and speaking to the helmsman. "Alter course to forty degrees." Then she lifts the flap on the engine-room speaking tube. "Engineer, we need maximum revs. At once."

I press my face to the soft rubber shade, and there in brilliant green is the echo, off to port, blipping intensely each time the sweep circles over it.

Captain Petersen returns to the viewer and glues herself to the eyeshade. The wheel house is silent while *Scoresby* vibrates along at flank speed. "The bearing is opening. Range is increasing." she says.

Five minutes later she stretches and smiles at me. "So much for our delusions. That poor fisherman, or whatever he was, will never know how we feared him. Helm, alter course back to two-eighty-three."

"It's probably a BMRT," I suggested. She looks puzzled. "Big Mother Russian Trawler," I explained. "They're all over the place out here. Actually, Captain, I think Washington may not fool with us. They may be desperate, but they don't really know how much we know, and to intervene out here with guns would boomerang, if for example, the director already knew what we were looking for."

"They are evil," says Captain Petersen with surprising intensity. "Power and death, that is what they seek."

At twenty-three forty, R/V *William Scoresby* is abreast of the main dock of the lab campus. The monkey's fists are flying across the narrow strip of water, and the campus cops are wrestling the big lines onto the iron bollards. The dock is brightly lit for our arrival, and several girls are waving enthusiastically at us while several boys wave back. Harry Harvey and I are leaning on the rail watching the bustle.

"Well, Prof, see you tomorrow," says Harry as his wife drives up in an orange bug. "Anything I should be doing?"

"Catch me between nine and ten A.M." I answer. "We'll get some transparencies made of these charts with maybe a couple of colored overlays to show the spread. OK?"

"You bet," and Harry is off down the gangway, swinging his overnight bag and waving cheerily at his cutie wife.

I am now alone and the lights ashore begin to wink off. On this

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trip back I have tried not to think about this time, but it is finally here. When I was a young assistant professor, I thought the most terrible thing was to be stupid. When I watched a weak student struggling with ideas that I could grasp in a moment, I felt pity but also gratitude that such a terrible frustration would never seize me in that manner. Now I know that was a childish and foolish view. The moments when they give you the medal are fine, all right, but there are great blocks of time in between those moments. Loneliness is far worse then stupidity. And smart people, having fewer like themselves to choose from, are often lonely. At his moment I would ... almost ... give up all my career, my medal, my papers, my students ... if only a woman was standing by a car on that pier. My great old house is empty, filled with things my wife selected over the years, filled with my books, an echoing cavern of many rooms that was built a hundred years ago for a large and lively family.

My depression grows as the pier lights go off. Three years since my wife moved to another room in our rambling place. And more years before that of acid arguments. But I have a tiny plan for which only the most forlorn hopes can be entertained. Do I dare? Why am I so shy, so weak? I climb, slowly this time, step by step, to the bridge. If only she has not left.

"Ah, Professor Franklin."

Hurray! She is in the wheel house. Now I *must* speak my piece.

"Well, ah, Captain. Our fearful trip is done. I wanted to ... ah ... say thanks and to apologize again for ...."

She shakes her head smiling. "You've handled your mighty secret well, Dr. Franklin. This has been a very professional cruise."

So now I must launch my tiny ploy, my wretched, sorry effort which only my aching loneliness would possibly bring forth. "I ... wonder if I might ... take you over to Zabo's place for a quick drink to celebrate our safe arrival?" Zabo's is the nearest pizza and beer roadhouse, where clots of the oceanography staff can often be found. What will she say? I am as tense as when we left the pier two days ago.

She takes my hand smiling. "Professor Franklin, at Zabo's right now are numbers of my crew getting bored and soused and numbers of your students getting excited and soused. We would be involved in shop talk and agitation. I think we would not have much opportunity to talk about ... things."

My heart sinks like a stone in the deep ocean. "Oh ... OK ... well, some other time, then ...." What my face must show I can only

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imagine, for she hurries on. "I have another proposal," and now her voice is softer, less assured. "We could go to my little house on the beach and have our drink there. And you can tell me about the end of the world, your own special end of the world."

How my heart leaps now! How stupid to have hesitated! "Oh, yes ... how nice of you to ask me. I think, Captain, ah ... Olga. Well, my first name is Bernard, Bernie."

She laughs so merrily at that, completely herself. "Bernie and Olga. How dull we sound!"

The Third Day

I am thinking, on this bright and brisk morning, that even uptight, distinguished-professor bigshots are totally, effortlessly overmatched by the gift of love. Our petty academic empires and specialties, our cruel elitism, our contempt for the uneducated; all ... all submerged and torn away by a mouth parted in a sigh, a lowered eyelid fluttering as passion gusts like a silent storm of bells. Olga's hair smells faintly of earthy sweetness. My heart is ringing.

"Dear Bernie." We are in her little kitchen sitting at the breakfast bar, side by side, our heads together, our hands touching on the table.

"Listen!" I whisper. "Tonight, let's meet at my house. I have thousands of rooms, bathtubs, showers, beds. We can run through them all ...."

But horny old professors should not confuse personal passions with a proper ending of the world. Practical Olga draws back and looks at me from warm eyes. "Bernie, sweet. Tonight you may be on the TV, God knows for how long. Your house will be besieged with media people; your phone probably tapped and certainly ringing. If you do get away tonight, the only sensible place is here where nobody can find you."

I nod and I sigh. Captains must act like captains. "I'll get here. Count on it."

And now she is all business. "Bernie, I've got to move *Scoresby* by noon if we go in for refit. Do you think the Director will want that, after he talks to you?"

"No, I think he'll want an immediate return to the yesterday station."

Captain Olga thinks about that. "Look," I say. "It's about eight o'clock. I'll get going to my office and hack the data into some kind of order. You get on the phone and try to locate the director at home. Tell him I told you that I found pollution so serious and critical that I believed he would not want *Scoresby* out of action this week. He'll probably come chasing over to the lab campus to find me. If you

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can't reach him by nine or so, give me a call, and I'll get that feather-headed secretary, Minda, looking for him."

"All right. I won't do anything about shifting *Scoresby* until after eleven. You two should be together by then ... Bernie?"

"Yeah."

"They may have already been in touch with the director. Do you think he might try to suppress this?"

I, of course (fink that I am), always assume professional and responsible behavior from everyone. Yet ... she might be right. The director and I have been friendly associates for a long time, but ... not friends ... not really. I suddenly realize that I don't know quite how Director John McGinn will deal with, as Olga called it, my mighty secret.

"I hope that won't happen. I believe it won't. Not just because John is an honorable person, but because too many people know ..." and suddenly I look at her. "I think," I end lamely.

Olga's house is ten minutes by car from the campus, and I soon pull into the ocean physics building lot, still mostly empty and quiet in the sunny, windy morning. My mind is dashing about, sorting the data and its development into groups and pieces, dealing with the director in several different scenarios, facing hostile and frightened questions from still-unknown adversaries. But that is all just dust-dry exercises dealing with the end of the world. Underneath it all is a core of lust and wonder. Olga's breath against my ear. Her softness under the khaki uniform.

"Professor Franklin?" I did not notice or even imagine them. Yet I know them in their conservative suits, their short hair, and their distant smiles. Not exactly robots. The shorter one is almost fat, and there is a suggestion of redness, of a booze problem, about his face. And I think, in surprise: Human? — while they extend their open wallets with the badges and cards inside.

"If you're here about a student, I don't give verbal comments or answer verbal questions. You must write me asking ...." But I know they are not here about a student. There would only be one, then, and he would not be in a parking lot at eight fifteen in the morning.

"We'd like to talk to you about your cruise the past two days," says the tall one in his flat Midwestern voice. "The material involved at that site is covered by secrecy orders and ...."

Now my mind is really racing. They have two cars! I suddenly realize, the second one lurking on the other side of the lot with two men inside quietly smoking. How

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stupid to have not forseen this! I should have arranged with Olga .... "I'm afraid you'll have to see Dr. McGinn if you have questions. He's the director of the lab ...."

They stare at me coldly. Many have tried to say our intelligence services are little more than Ivy League buffoons playing spy. But Americans have never lacked the will to hurt and kill their own people. We are no different than any society. It's really only a matter of selecting the kind of people you need.

"We don't think the director does know about your research, Professor. You're evidently playing some sort of lone hand in this. Governments have to protect themselves too, Professor Franklin." And with that menacing platitude, they put their wallets back in their coats, and I hear a car door open across the lot. I must act this instant! Either run around the corner and shout for the campus cops ... and how will they react even if they hear me? Or get back in my car and lock the doors. But these persons are experts at things of which I have no understanding. My tenseness shows and the tall one holds up his hand. "Don't do something foolish. This isn't a game, Professor."

"Bernie! Just the guy I want to see!"

What a wave of relief floods over me! The director himself is walking briskly toward us from the bioscience complex. How events have reversed themselves! Now fear and anger is in their faces, especially the tall one. How much does he know? Do they think I can bring down the government? The party? The system itself? Just how desperate are these men?

"John," I say and my voice is quavery, terrified. "We've got to talk now. A terrible emergency ...."

"So I gathered," says the director, barely looking at the two spooks. "Your student ... ah ... Harrison Harvy gave me a call. At midnight, for Christ's sake! Said the world was ending. Oxygen gone or going in the North Atlantic. Said I should call you but you weren't home. No answer. Tried you this morning. Gone again! What in Hell is going on, Bernie?"

So Harry called the director. On his own, never a word to me. There are wheels within wheels. Others can act independently, surprisingly. Yet Harry doing this has ... saved me? Even saved my life? Suddenly I realized that, if I had been the student, I would probably have done the same thing. In his independence, his assurance of self, he chooses to grasp events, to not be a spectator. "We must talk inside, John," and I indicate the rolled-up maps and papers under my arm.

The big goon has turned to the

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director and, automatonlike, has his wallet once again in his left hand. "Dr. McGinn, I'm afraid we must hear this discussion too. The Department of Defense is deeply involved ...."

McGinn looks sharply at them for the first time. "You boys are up early," he says, and now his voice is like ice, stiff and about to crack in anger. "But you have no claims here. Dr. Franklin is not an employee of the government, holds no clearance, and is working on private research. If you want to talk to me about this, you'll have to make an appointment. Unfortunately, I'm quite busy this week. Please call my secretary and tell her what you want. Perhaps she can fit you in."

The spook takes a step toward McGinn and, his final mistake, puts a hand on the director's arm. "This really is too important to wait ...."

But the director, moving only his head, has turned to look at me. "Bernie, will you walk over to the guard shack and ask them to come over here. Tell them we have some people making nuisances of themselves, and I want them removed from the university property."

The tall one steps back. "Now just a minute here ..." but they are no competition for the director. Once he and I are separated, any plans of seizure are ruined, while the possibility of bringing along the director with me must seem impossible with him standing there, his voice a stabbing icicle. His control and confidence is a wall against that initial bit of violence, that first lawless step. The car doors slam and, suddenly, we are alone in the parking lot and the director is looking at me grinning.

"Were they here to take you away, Bernie?"

"I think they were. I think you may have just saved my life." The director's eyebrows shoot up at that, but he says nothing.

The drafting table next to my bookcase is covered with books and minor paraphernalia, but I sweep it all onto the floor and spread out the two maps, holding the corners with little lead whale paperweights that one of my children gave me years ago at Christmas.

"John, before we look at the data and the projections, let me tell you how this all got started," and McGinn nods soberly and sits in the chair beside my desk. As I did on *Scoresby* yesterday morning (God! Only yesterday!), I tell the story of Fred Kenyon and the herbicide that recreates itself and the three trips to the site. "You know we need three good stations to make decent projections, and we finished the third yesterday afternoon. I'm sure the computations are OK."

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John McGinn stands up and stares at the North Atlantic Basin sketch map and the isopleths of dissolved oxygen. "You're saying that Atlantic surface D.O. will depress to less than two parts even beyond the Arctic Circle?"

I nod. "And over the cap too, John. I can't see right now what will stop it." How silent the building is! The stillness between us is like wool.

But suddenly an extraordinary sound intrudes. John McGinn, hard-nosed administrator, driving chief scientist, member of commissions and committees, advisor to the Congress, utters a deep sob.

Startled, I look up and see that John's cheeks are wet and tears are running down wind-creased cheeks. "Bernie! My God! The krill can't live in that! The whole food chain will disappear! The whales .... The whales! We'll never save them. Everything we've ever done .... Meaningless .... Utter disaster!"

Now my cheeks are wet too. I put my arm around John's shoulders. We stand together, staring blindly down at the map. John walks to the window and looks out. I wait. Finally he turns and smiles. "Bernie, I have a lot of public images and crybaby isn't one of them. If we could keep this little scene between the two of us, I would be most grateful."

And now I smile back. "Only Olga will know. I must tell her everything. But the tears do you no discredit. There really is no other proper response."

Old John changes like the New England wind. His grin is broad, boyish now. "Olga? Captain Petersen? You and Olga Petersen? Why ... of course, Bernie! How perfect! How wonderful! Why, she's *more* than a match for you."

"Well, John," I say, "I'm not competing with her. My first wife and I were into that. I ... I need a captain. That's sort of been my problem."

"If you decide to get married and I'm not the best man, you're fired. Tenure and the AAUP will never save you, Bernie ...." John McGinn runs on, but the chart still lies on the table, and we must turn to it again.

"Bernie," says John McGinn, "we're going to find out how to reverse this! We *must* believe there is an answer," and in moments he is on the phone to gorgeous, dopey Minda.

"Now, Minda, get your pad," says McGinn. "Write everything down because you won't remember. Ready? First, there will be a general emergency meeting of the entire school, students and faculty, at eleven this morning. All classes are canceled. Attendance is compulsory. Call the department secretaries and get them going on round-

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ing up the staff and students. We'll meet in the main lecture hall in the *Challenger* building. Second. Cable the following message to Captain Malo, R/V *Ocean Tracker*. They're off West Africa. Cancel all research programs at once. Urgent - you return here as soon as possible, starting no later than twenty-four hundred hours this date. Wire confirmation. Details to follow. Signed, McGinn." The director turns to me, covering the phone with his hand. "Malo and *Ocean Tracker* can act as your relief and consort out there as soon as they get back, Bernie. Decide today who you want as chief scientist on board. Minda, read that back." Then came calls to the publicity office, the marine super, the chairman of chemical oceanography, the ....

Harry Harvey knocks on the door at nine thirty, and I leave the now-shouting McGinn, scoop up my papers, and step into the quiet hall. Harry smiles at me. "Sounds like the director is going to save his whales, no matter what," says Harry. "I ... I called him about this last night."

"Thanks, Harry, for doing that," and I tell him my little story of the parking-lot kidnaping caper and my rescue by John McGinn.

Harry is silent a moment, then: "I didn't guess about that, Prof. Who would? I called McGinn because I thought it would help you if he realized other people were in on this and stirred up about it. I knew you wouldn't cop out. I guess I needn't have worried about McGinn either. But this spook thing ...."

I nod. How warm and proud I feel with Harry. "Harry, we're together in this until it's resolved ... one way or another."

"Then I'd better get some overhead projector slides of the stuff. I heard about McGinn's eleven o'clock meeting from the physics secretary. I'll use contrasting colors on the isopleth overlays, OK?" And off he dashes with our charts and data.

When I reenter my office, John McGinn is talking with my Olga. "Captain, restock *Scoresby* for water and grab sampling plus possible current drifter deployments. Food for crew and full staff for a week. Dr. Franklin as chief, and we may have consorts. I have a request into Maryland right now. The university's big one, R/V *States Pride*, is at her dock, and the lab director there is in with the university provost now about this. Oh ... ah ... Bernie just came back in. Here he is, Captain." And McGinn hands me the phone.

"Hi, Bernie."

I find I cannot speak for a moment. Her voice has released a flood of joy. I finally manage, "Hi. Hey, they almost got me in the

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parking lot, four agents in two cars. John McGinn came by and saved me like the Seventh Cavalry."

Now she is briefly silent. "Bernie, please stay with the director until your meeting. Promise?"

"Absolutely. All is well. Will you be at the meeting?"

"Of course. Oh, Bernie! Think! Tomorrow we'll be together in my little cabin on *Scoresby*! How I love you!"

And that astounding vision, so far beyond any possible concupiscent dream as to be entirely outside the normal reality, has instantly reduced me to a foolish babble of "My beloved ... my beloved ..." until a beaming John McGinn retrieves my phone and finishes off his instructions to the captain of my soul.

To have started the campus-wide meeting by eleven in the morning required a greater miracle than even John McGinn could work. But by eleven twenty the auditorium is choked with people, standing, sitting on the floor, pushing in at the doors, and all quiet, waiting patiently for doomsday to begin. Harry is ready at the projector with our slides. I am ready with my notes. And now McGinn stands up and stares out at the great throng, the TV and newspaper people, the university president and his entourage of deans, people from the legislature and the governor's office, the crew of *Scoresby*, dear Olga, my friends and my enemies.

"Let's get this meeting going," shouts McGinn. "This is going to be a busy day for all of us." The auditorium is still as death.

"This is Professor Bernie Franklin's show," says McGinn and his voice is hard and cold again. He looks scornfully at the media people and the politicians, then darkly at the president of the university, who came to us from the Department of Defense. "As you listen to Bernie's story and findings, I suggest you think about what has happened to this country. I suggest you consider how we can

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make our leadership, both political and military, responsive once again to sane and proper goals. We stand on a knife edge of disaster! Think about whether you want to leave the solutions up to incompetent, faceless ...."

I am astounded. The end of the world has radicalized John McGinn. The establishment has made a formidable enemy. By the six P.M. news, what may he be saying? I suddenly think: I would not wish to be wearing a military uniform in America tomorrow .... But McGinn is as brief as he is vituperative, and suddenly he turns and smiles at me. "You all, or most, know, Bernie. They, our elected and democratic government, tried to kidnap him this morning in the physics parking lot. To silence him. To silence us. While the Atlantic Ocean dies!"

A gasp. Surely the most effective introduction I have ever heard. I stand up and look out to sweet Olga and I am calm and steady. With a practiced hand I spin the main dimmer knob around, and the room goes smoothly dark. Harry snaps on the projector, and I, like the thoroughly educated Professor H. M. Wogglebug, am silhouetted, pinned by light against a corner of the huge screen. But it is not my nerves that now spread like webs on the glowing rectangle, but the fate of the world. For we have confounded Christ and Darwin together. By the merest shrug, the most casual, unthinking gesture we destroy not only ourselves, but, grossest, most disgusting evil of all, we will kill the fish and birds and beasts. All innocent, blameless, possessing neither sin nor understanding. Who or what permitted us to be stewards of this earth?

Outside, the sunflash on the sharp whitecaps glitters like silver coins against the cooling, dark sea. Gulls wheel and cry, and late-season sailors tack over the choppy waves, their cheeks wet with joyous spray. But in the auditorium all is dim and quiet. My voice spins out, telling of the ruin of our hopes, the end of our fitful days. And before this day has ended, other strong men will weep, and many more will curse. Dreams and ideals will fail, and hate and fear will loom and spin like the great banked clouds of a hurricane. But Olga and I will rage against the falling of this night ... together.

I am content.

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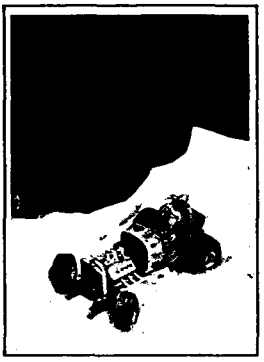
A



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Hunting for pirate treasure in the Galapagos Islands, another in Mr. de Camp's entertaining series about Willy Newbury.

Dead Man's Chest

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

After I got rid of Habib the jinn, our boy Stephen, who had a summer job, arrived at Ocean Bay to spend a weekend with his old folks. Stevie was full of a plan that he and his friend Hank had dreamed up, to hunt for pirate treasure with a World War II mine detector on an island off the Jersey coast. A local tradition claimed that Captain Charles Vane had once put in there to bury his hoard.

Stephen told me about it while we labored through a round of miniature golf, into which he had coaxed me. Tennis is my game, although as a banker I have to play golf in the way of business. But Stephen is too slow and dreamy ever to make a tennis player.

The miniature course had fancy decorations. There were models of space rockets, grotesque animals like dinosaurs, and mythical monsters, such as a life-sized statue of a fish-man like those my pulp-writing friend in Providence used to write about. It had fins running down its back and webbed hands and feet like those of a duck. It stood on a revolving turntable. I asked the ticket taker about it.

"I dunno," said this man. "It's one of them things that crazy artist who designed this place put in. Said he'd seen one alive once, but it was probably a case of the DTs. He's dead now."

We finished our round as Stephen wound up his account of their treasure-hunting plan. He looked at me apprehensively.

"I suppose," he said, "you'll tell me it couldn't possibly work, for some reason we never thought of."

"I don't want to spoil your fun," I said. "If you'd prefer, I won't say a word."

"No, go ahead, Dad. I'd rather have the bad news now than later, after we'd wasted our time."

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"Okay," I said. "As I understand it, the routine on a pirate ship was, as soon as possible after taking a prize, to hold the share-out. This was done, not by the captain, but by the quartermaster, normally a pirate too old for pike-and-cutlass work but trusted by the crew. The division was equal, except that the captain might get a double share and the other ship's officers — the doctor, the gunner, and so on — might get one and a half shares, according to the ship's articles. Anyone who held back loot was liable to be hanged or at least keelhauled.

"You see, the captain didn't get all that rich from a capture. When the ship got back to its base, the pirates spent their shares in one grand bust. Rarely did enough loot accumulate in the hands of any one man to be worth burying. Moreover, I thought the pirate Vane stuck pretty close to the Carribbean."

Poor Stevie's mouth turned down, as it always did when I shot down one of his wild ideas. The year before, he and Hank had talked of going to the Galāpagos Islands to grow copra. Somehow that sounded glamorous. I had to explain that, first, those islands did not produce copra; second, that copra was nothing but dried coconut meat, which stank in the process of drying and was eventually turned into shampoo oil or fed to the hogs in Iowa.

As things turned out, Stephen had a chance both to see the Galāpagos Islands and to hunt for treasure much sooner than either of us expected.

The following summer, my boss, Esau Drexel, took off in his yacht for one of his expeditions in marine biology. Before he left, he said:

"Willy, I can't take you on the whole cruise, because somebody has to run the trust company. But we're going to the Galāpagos. Why don't you take Denise and the kids, fly to Guayaquil and Baltra, and meet me there? We can make a tour of the islands. It'll be a great experience, and you can be back in ten or twelve days. McGill can handle the business while you're gone."

It did not take much persuasion. Of my family, only Hēloise, our undergraduate daughter, balked. She said her summer job was too important, she had promised her employers, and so on. I suspected that she did not want to go too far from the young man she was in love with. Stephen, who had just graduated from high school, was enthusiastic.

An airplane put Mr. and Mrs. Wilson Newbury, with son Stephen and daughter Priscille, down on

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the island of Baltra, where Drexel's *Amphitrite* was moored to the pier. The two little ships that took tourists around the islands were both out, and so the *Amphitrite* had plenty of room.

Drexel, looking very pukka sahib in shorts and bush jacket, with his white mustache and sunburned nose, greeted us with his usual roar. With him he had his wife, a little gray-haired woman who seldom got a chance to say much. There was another man, small, tanned, and white-haired, whom I had not met.

"This is Ronald Tudor," said Drexel. "Ronnie, meet Denise and Willy Newbury. Willy's the one who keeps the Harrison Trust from going broke while I'm away from the helm. Willy, Ronnie's the man who recovered the loot from the *Santa Catalina*, off Melbourne."

"Melbourne, Australia?" I asked.

"No, stupid, Melbourne, Florida. She was one of the treasure fleet wrecked there in 1715."

"Oh," I said. "Is that your regular business, Mr. Tudor?"

"Wouldn't ever call that kind of business regular," said the little oldster with a sly grin. He had a quick, explosive way of speaking. "I do work at it off and on. Right now — but better wait till we shove off."

"You mean," said Priscille, "you're going to find some treasure in these islands, Mr. Tudor?"

"You'll see, young lady. Since we're not sailing till tomorrow morning, how about a swim?"

We swam from the nearby beach, where the hulk of a World War II landing craft lay upside down and rusting to pieces. The children had fun chasing ghost crabs. These, when cut off from their burrows, scuttled into the water and buried themselves out of sight.

Back at the *Amphitrite*, we met the Ecuadorian pilot, Flavio Ortega, when he came aboard. Flavio was a short, broad, copper-colored man with flat Mongoloid features. While he must have been at least three-quarters Indian, he had the Hispanic *bonhommie*. When I tried my stumbling Castillian on him, he cried:

"But, your accent is better than mine! *i Usted habla como un caballero espanol!*"

He was a flatterer, of course; but one of life's lessons is that flattery will get you everywhere.

While we sat on the fantail nursing our cocktails before dinner, Esau Drexel explained: "The waters around these islands have got more rocks in them than the Democrats have in their heads. So we've got to have a local man to keep us from running into them."

"Well," I said, "how about Ronnie's great secret?"

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When Tudor looked doubtful, Drexel said, "You can trust him as far as you can anybody, Ronnie. He's worked for me for ten years."

"Okay," said Tudor. "Wait a minute."

He went out and came back with a folder containing sheets of paper. In a lowered voice, he said, "Be careful; don't let water from your glass drip on these. They're only photostats, but we need 'em."

I examined the sheets. They were reproductions of three pages from an old manuscript, written in a large, clear longhand. The English had many obsolete usages, which put the domument back two or three centuries. The sheets read as follows:

—and so departed yt Iland.

On June ye 6th, Capt. Eaton anchored in a Cove on ye NW Side of ye Iland, ye which Mr. Cowley hath named ye Duke of York's Iland. This Cove, which Mr. Cowley calls Albany Bay, is sheltered by a small, rocky Iland over against it. This little Iland hath a rocky Pinnacle, like unto a pointing Finger. Mr. Dampier assured us, yt Water was to be found on ye larger Ilands, like unto ys One, even during ye long Drought of Summer. Whiles ye Men went ashoar to seek for Springs or Brooks, Capt. Eaton privily took me aside and said: Mr. Henderson, ye Time hath come to bury yt which lies in ye Chest. Sith I know you for a true Man, I will yt ye and I, alone, shall undertake ys ticklish Task, saying Nought to Any. But Captain, I said, be ye determined upon ys Course? For by God's Blood, sir, it seems to me yt ye Contents of ye Chest would, if used with Sense and Prudence, furnish us with a handsome Living back in England for ye Rest of our mortal Dayes. If we ever get home, said Capt. Eaton; but with ys accursed Thing aboard, I doubt me we ever shall. A Curse lies upon it; witness our Failure to take ye Spanish Ship whilst she had 800,000 Pieces of Eight aboard; so yt all we gat for our Trouble was a Load of Flower, a Mule for the President of Panama, a wooden Image of ye Virgin, and 8 Tuns of Quince Marmalade. Well, saith he, verily, our Men have a Plenty of Flower wherewith to make Bread and of Jam to eat thereon, but we had liefer have ye Money. The Men also be in Fear of what it may bring upon us and will be happy to see ye Last of it.

So we went ashoar in ye Pinnance with ye Chest. Capt. Eaton and I carried ye Chest inland from ye Shoar and thence up ye Slope towards ye SW to ye To pof ye Cliff, which overlooks ye Cove. At ye Tip of ye Point, which marks ye western Limit of ye Bay, we buried, ye Chest, and not without much hard Labour, for it was heavy to bear

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and ye rocky soil hard to dig withal. When we returned to ye Ship

"Where did this come from?" I asked.

"Picked up the originals at an auction in London," said Tudor. "They're in a safe at home, naturally."

"Well, what does it mean?"

"Good God, don't you see, man?" Tudor exploded. "It's as plain as the nose on your face. This Henderson must have been one of the officers of Captain Eaton's *Nicholas* — the boatswain or the gunner, maybe — which stopped here in June, 1684."

"How do you know the year?"

"Because he mentions Dampier and Cowley, who were here with him in the *Batchelor's Delight* at that time. The buccaneer Ambrose Cowley gave the islands their first set of individual names, although the Spaniards later rechristened them, and then the Ecuadorians gave them a third set. Gets confusing. Cowley called his island the Duke of York's Island. Then Charles Second died, and the Duke of York became James Second, so the island became James. Spanish called it Santiago, and then the Ecuadorians decided on San Salvador."

"'Santiago' ought to please everybody, since it means 'Saint James'," I said. "although I don't believe James the Second was very saintly."

"Most English-speakers still use 'James,'" said Tudor.

"Is this all there is to the manuscript?"

"That's all. Did some sleuthing — British Museum and such — to try and locate the rest, but no dice. Probably somebody used it to light a fire. Couldn't find any other record of Henderson, either. But this is the important part, so what the hell."

"All right, assuming the document refers to the present James or Santiago Island, do you think you can find this chest from these scanty directions? I thought James was a large island."

"It is, but the directions are as plain as a Michelin guidebook. This bay is what we call Buccaneer Cove. All we have to do is land there and follow Henderson's directions. With a metal detector, it ought to be a breeze."

I thought. "One more thing, Ronnie. The paper doesn't say what was *in* the chest. How do you know it's worth going after?"

"It wasn't money, or it would have been divided in the share-out. It was something of value, as you can tell by Henderson's comment. Evidently one single thing, not divisible. Must have been something of religious or supernatuaral

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significance, or the crew wouldn't have gotten spooked. My guess is, some fancy religious gewgaw — a jeweled crown for a statue of the Virgin, or maybe a golden religious statuette, which the buccaneers stole from one of the Catholic churches along the coast. But what the hell, we'll see when we dig it up. It's worth the chance."

Esau Drexel glanced over his shoulder and spoke in a low voice. "We need your help, Willy. I don't want to let the crew in on it, for obvious reasons, but this takes a bit of muscle. You remember how Henderson found the chest hefty to carry. Now, I'm too old and fat for hauling a couple hundred pounds around rough country, and Ronnie's too old and small. There'll be some digging, too. But you're an athletic type, and your boy has pretty good muscles.

"Ronie and I have agreed to go halves on whatever we find. If you'll come in with us, I'll give you half of my half, or a quarter of the total."

"Fair enough," I said. Drexel had his faults, but stinginess with his considerable wealth was not one of them.

At this time, the Galápagos Parque Nacional had been established only a few years, and things were not so tightly organized as they became later. Nowadays, I understand, the wardens would be down on you like a ton of gravel if you tried anything like treasure hunting.

The next week we spent in cruising the southern islands. We saw the frigate birds and the blue-footed boobies on North Seymour. We were chased along the beach on Loberia by a big bull sea lion who thought we had designs on his harem. On Hood, we watched a pair of waved albatros go through their courtship dance, waddling around each other and clattering their bills together. We gauped at swarms of marine iguanas, clinging to the black rocks and sneezing at us when we came close. We admired the flamingos in the muddy lagoon on Floreana.

On Plaza, Priscille, the strongest wildlife buff in the family, had the thrill of feeding some greenery to a big land iguana. That would not be allowed nowadays. On Santa Cruz (or Indefatigable) we visited the Charles Darwin Research Station. They told us of breeding tortoises in captivity, to reintroduce them on islands whence they had been exterminated.

We dropped anchor in Buccaneer Cove on James, behind the islet with the rocky pinnacle of which Henderson had written. The four treasure-hunters went ashore in the launch, leaving young Priscille furious at not being taken along.

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Denise was more philosophical.

"Have yourself the fun, my old," she said. "For me, to sit on a cactus once on a trip is enough."

We left Flavio Ortega in charge of the boat, having told him we were looking for a brass marker plate left by Admiral de Torres in 1793.

"Be careful, gentlemen," he said. "There is said to be a — how do you say — *una maldicion* —?"

"A curse?" I said.

"Yes, of course, a curse. They say there is a curse on this place, from all the bisits of the wicked pirates who preyed on us poor Esspanish peoples. Of course, that is just a superstition, but watch your steps. The ground is treacherous."

We headed inland. Stephen carried the shovels, and I, the pick and the goose-necked wrecking bar. Tudor toted the metal detector, and Drexel, the lunch.

The weight of my burdens increased alarmingly as we scrambled up the rocky wall that bounded the beach. Above this rise, the sloping ground was fairly smooth, but parts of it were a talus of dark-gray sand made from disintegrated lava. Our feet sank into it, and it tended to slip out from under us.

There was a scattering of low shrubs. Higher, the hillsides were covered with an open stand of the pale-gray *palo santo* or holy-stick trees, leafless at this time of year. Even the parts of these volcanic islands with a plant cover have an unearthly aspect, like a lunar landscape.

A narrow ravine cut through the terrain on its way to the bay. We had to climb the bluff on the eastern side of this gulch, and our goal lay on the west side. The ravine was too wide to jump, and its sides were too steep to scramble down and up. So we had to hike inland for half a mile or so until we found a place narrow enough to hop across. Drexel and Tudor were both pretty red and winded by that time.

The day was hotter and brighter than most. Although right on the equator, the Galāpagos Islands (or Islas Encantadas or Archipielago de Colon) are usually rather cool, from the cold Humboldt Current and the frequent overcasts of the doldrum belt. I smeared sun-tan oil on my nose.

I could also not help thinking of Ortega's curse. Most of my friends consider me a paragon of cold rationality and common sense, never fooled by mummeries and superstitions. In my business, that is a useful reputation. But still, funny things have happened to me....

On the western side of the ravine, we hiked back down the slope. Then we cut across towards

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the tip of the western point, keeping at more or less the same altitude. When we neared the apex, we stopped to let Tudor set up the metal detector.

When he thumbed the switch, the instrument gave out a faint hum. Tudor began to quarter the area. He moved slowly, a step at a time, swinging the head of the detector back and forth as if he were sweeping or vacuum-cleaning.

Drexel, Stephen, and I sat on the slope and ate our lunch. A handbill given us at Baltra warned us not to leave any litter. Nowadays they are still tougher about it.

The detector continued its hum, getting louder or softer as Tudor came nearer or went further away. It made me nervous to see him close to the tip of the point. The surface on which he was working was fairly steep, so that walking took an effort of balance. If you fell down and rolled or slid, you might have trouble stopping yourself. This slope continued down to the top of the cliff, which here was a forty-foot vertical drop into the green Pacific.

At last, when Tudor was twenty-five or thirty feet from the edge, the hum of the instrument changed to a warble. Tudor stood a long time, swinging the detector.

"Here y'are," he said. "I'll eat my lunch while you fellas dig."

Since Stephen and I were the muscle men, we fell to. There was no sound but the faint sigh of the breeze, the scrape of the shovels, and the bark of a distant sea lion. Once Stephen, stopping to wipe the sweat from his face, cried, "Hey, Dad, look!"

He pointed to the dorsal fin of a shark, which lazily cut the water out from the cliff. We watched it out of sight and resumed our digging. Having finished his lunch, Tudor came forward to wave his detector over the pit we had dug. The warble was loud and clear.

We began getting into hardpan, so that we had to take the pick to loosen stones of increasing size. Then the pick struck something that did not sound like another stone.

"Hey!" said Drexel.

We soon uncovered the top of a chest, the size of an old-fashioned steamer trunk and much distressed by age. Drexel, Tudor, and Stephen chattered excitedly. I kept quiet, a dim foreboding having taken hold of me. Somehow the conviction formed in my mind that, if the chest were opened, one of us would die.

Tudor was nothing to me; I distrust adventurer types. I should be sorry to lose Drexel, a friend as well as a boss. But the thought crossed my mind that I might succeed him as president of the trust company. I was ashamed of the thought, but there it was. For

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myself, I was willing to take chances, but that anything should happen to Stephen was unbearable.

I wanted to shout: stop, leave that thing alone! Or, at least, let me send Stevie back to the ship before you open it. But what argument could I offer? It was nothing but an irrational feeling — the kind of "premonition" we get from time to time but remember only on the rare occasions when it is fulfilled by the event. I had no evidence.

"Tired, Willy?" said Drexel. "Here, give me that shovel!"

He grabbed the implement and began digging in his turn, grunting and blowing like a walrus. Soon he and Stephen had the chest excavated down below the lower edge of the lid.

The chest had a locked iron clasp, but this was a mass of rust. The wood of the chest was so rotten that, at the first pry with the wrecking bar, the lock tore out of the wood. Stephen burst into song:

"Fifteen men on a dead man's chest,
Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum!
Drink and the devil had done for the rest,
Yo, ho, ho and a —"

He broke off as Drexel and Tudor lifted the lid with a screech of ancient hinges.

"Good God!" said Ronald Tudor. "What's this?"

In the chest, face up, lay a fish-man like that of which a statue stood in the miniature golf course at Ocean Bay. The thing had been bound with leather thongs in a doubled-up position, with its knees against its chest. Its eyes were covered by a pair of large gold coins.

"Some kind of sea monster," Drexel breathed. "Oh, boy, if I can only get it as a specimen for the Museum ...."

Tudor, eyes agleam, shot out two skinny hands and snatched the coins. He jerked away with a startled yelp. "The goddamn thing's alive!"

The fish-man's bulging eyes opened. For one breath it lay in its coffin, regarding us with a wall-eyed stare. Then its limbs moved into jerky action. The leather thongs, brittle with age, snapped like grass stems.

The fish-man's webbed, three-fingered hands gripped the sides of the chest. It heaved itself into a sitting position and stood up. It started to climb out of the excavation.

"Jesus!" cried Tudor.

The fish-man was climbing out on the side towards the sea, which happened to be the side on which Tudor stood. Tudor, apparently thinking himself attacked, shoved

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the coins into his pants pocket, snatched up a shovel, and swung it at the fish-man.

The blade of the shovel thudded against the fish-man's scaly shoulder. The fish-man opened its mouth, showing a row of long, sharp, fish-catching teeth. It gave a hiss, like the noise a Galāpagos tortoise makes when it withdraws into its shell.

"Don't — I mean —" cried Drexel.

As Tudor swung the shovel back for another blow, the fish-man moved stiffly towards him, fangs bared, arms and webbed hands spread. Tudor stumbled back, staggering and slipping in the loose sloping soil. The two moved towards the cliff, Tudor dodging from side to side and threatening the fish-man with his shovel.

"Watch out!" yelled Drexel and I together.

Tudor backed off the cliff and vanished. The monster dove after him. Two splashes came up, in quick succession, from below.

When we reached the top of the cliff, Tudor's body was lying awash below us. We caught a glimpse of the fish-man, flapping swiftly along like a sea lion just below the surface and heading for deep water. In a few seconds, it was gone.

"We've got to see if Ronnie's alive," said Drexel.

"Stevie," I said, "run back to the top of the little cliff just this side of the ravine. Call down to Flavio, telling him to bring the boat. Don't mention the monster —"

"Aw, Dad, I can get down that little cliff," said Stephen. He was gone before I could argue. He slithered down the cliff like a marine iguana and leaped the last ten feet to sprawl on the beach. In a minute he was in the launch, which soon buzzed around to the place where Tudor had fallen.

Stephen and Ortega got Tudor into the boat, but he was already dead. He had been dashed against a point of rock in his fall.

"Maybe," said Ortega, "there is a evil esspell on this place after all."

"Well," said Drexel later, "at least we know now what Captain Eaton meant by 'this accursed thing.'"

We sailed back to Baltra and arranged for the local burial of Ronald Tudor.

"He was kind of a con man," said Drexel, "but an interesting one. Let's not put anything in our report to the local authorities about the monster. We don't have a specimen to show, and the Ecuadorians might think we had murdered poor Ronnie and were trying to cover it up with a wild yarn."

So we said only that our companion had met death by misad-

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venture. While I had not much liked the man, his death cast a pall on our vacation. Instead of rounding out our tour by visiting Tower, Isabela, and Fernandina Islands, we cut it short. Drexel sailed for the Panama Canal, while the Newburys flew home. After we got back, it was as if Ronald Tudor and the fish-man had never existed.

But, although I have been back to Ocean Bay several times since, nobody has ever again inveigled me into playing a round at that miniature golf course. To have the revolving statue of a fish-man goggling at me while I was addressing the ball would give me the willies. No pun intended.

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WIZARDS, GARBAGE ET AL.

Having just celebrated a birthday (43rd, if you must know, and I'm a Taurus born on May Eve — or Walpurgisnacht — which gives you an idea of how long my lead time is), I'm feeling a bit peevish, which I'm afraid will be the general tone of this column.

First off, a PS to last month's column. I saw *Demon Seed* at a screening before it had opened here, and as you may remember, while I felt it had its flaws, it was a valid and interesting idea, mainly because it had come from an in-genre book by Dean R. Koontz.

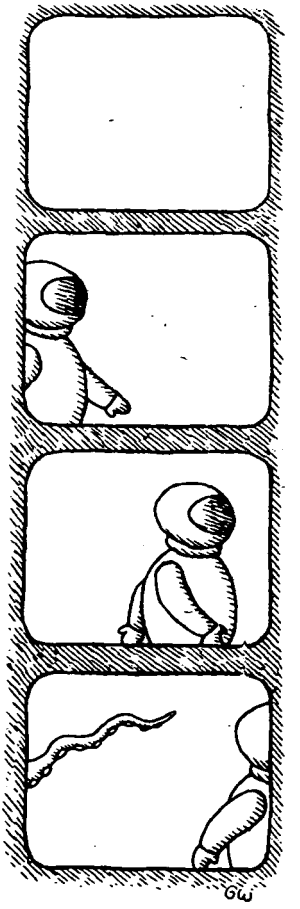
When it opened, the general critics' reviews were overloaded with words such as "ridiculous," "stupid," and "silly." (Not to mention a good deal of behind-the-barn type sniggering at the idea of a computer raping a woman.)

Again, the film had its flaws, but an inept basic conception (no pun intended) was not one of them. Which just goes to show that no matter how popular s/f grows, there will still be a large percentage of the population (including most of the film critics) who consider anything beyond the sphere of their own limited experience to be stupid, ridiculous, etc.

I'm also peevish about this month's movie, Ralph Bakshi's

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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Wizards. which, having played every tank town in the country, finally opened in the Big Apple.

I firmly believe that the animated film has barely touched its potential for handling fantasy (where it has is mostly in early — I emphasize *early* — Disney). Here finally is an animated film that tackled the stuff of epic fantasy — a quest through a world of wizards and elves, a defense against an evil and all-powerful Dark Lord, a universe where magic is as valid as physical science (all this, curiously enough, given a semi-science fiction rationale as having occurred post-holocaust; the baddies are, of course, mutants).

Unfortunately, Bakshi, instead of trying to handle this in any way worthy of its content, chose to draw his stylistic inspiration from the comics.

I'll have to digress here for a moment to make my point. Science fiction comics have developed into a category almost separate from literary s/f. They are often arresting visually, but by the very nature of the medium must be derivitive or irrational, since presenting original s/f or fantasy concepts convincingly takes words, words, words. (This is, of course, a major problem in film, too.)

The narrative must move fast to the extent of being choppy, again because of the nature of the medium. And finally, because of their readership, which is primarily (but not exclusively) adolescent, they are suffused with a sophomoric humor which I for one find hard to take.

All of this applies directly to *Wizards.* The good wizard, Avatar (urgh), has a Bronx accent and says things like "Cool down — I got it and it ain't good." The principal male elf is named Weehawk. The queen of the elves looks like a fugitive from Porny Underground Comix with wings. And the good wizard (who represents truth, beauty, magic, grass, waterfalls, stars, natural shampoos and all those things) does in the bad wizard (who is evil, technology, Naziism, combustion engines, hydrogen bombs, etc. incarnate) with a pistol, which is a great joke if you like your movies totally meaningless philosophically.

The film is often interesting visually. There is a frequently effective use of combined live action and animation, particularly that process by which a live action sequence is stripped to silhouette, with perhaps just eyes added by animation. The fact that I recognized some of my favorite bits from *Alexander Nevsky* treated in this way slightly lessened the effectiveness, though.

In all, I can't even call *Wizards* a noble failure. But it is not without interest.

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Small screen dept.... Norman Lear's new evening soap, *All That Glitters,* can legitimately be called speculative fiction, since it deals with a sort of alternate present where the female is dominant. It's done rather subtly; the women are still feminine but are also assertive and interested only in what our culture considers "masculine" matters. And contrariwise for the men. Unfortunately, nothing more can be said for it; the plot lines, like all soaps, are endlessly repetitive and get nowhere fast.

I saw something called *Quark,* purportedly a pilot for a series about an interstellar garbage scow. One could play on the garbage theme, but even that would be too kind; it may have the most abysmal TV production I have ever seen. *This* is where the adjectives "stupid," "ridiculous" etc. *should* be used.

This was immediately followed on my small screen by another two-hour TV-film devoted to the man from Atlantis. As before, all the attention was focussed on the man, a personable if none-too-scintillating amphibian type, and none on Atlantis, which was what *I* was interested in. Just another pretty superhero, I'm afraid. And two of the most obtuse aliens ever to set foot on Terra (firma) didn't help.

It occurs to me, on rereading this column, that all my peevishness herein has been vented on the dichotomy between pseudo s/f (as created by outsiders to the genre) and real s/f (as viewed by outsiders). There is still a large schism there.

Literary dept.... One thing I've found *not* to be peevish about is a book from Harmony Books called *Fantastic Television,* by Gary Gerani with Paul H. Schulman. A large-sized paperback, it is beautifully laid out; every major fantasy and s/f series has not only a long article devoted to it, but an invaluable index of episodes. Minor series, British and kids' shows are also covered, and there is an alphabetical listing of TV-movies.

This is the first book I know of to be devoted to fantasy and science fiction TV. I don't see how there could be a better one for quite a while.

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A grim piece of science fiction about a good old-fashioned country dinner, a game of chess, and a swing on the porch . . .

One Fine Day

by ERIC NORDEN

It had required more time, again, and as she left the room, shrugging a robe over her nakedness, Gellert began to shake violently. Cold sweat trickled down his forehead, filming his eyes, and when he fumbled a cigarette from the box on the desk, his hand brushed her blue card to the floor. The match danced in his fingers and flamed out. He tried twice again before the smoke grated harshly against his lungs and only then remembered to retrieve the card and slide it into her folder. He didn't look at the name.

Three thirty-five. As the shaking subsided, he scanned the desk calendar. Two more appointments today, and then a session with Gershmann. Gellert felt the familiar wild surge of panic but refused to succumb. Not today, screw them all. He stood up with an effort, ground out the cigarette and clipped the green plastic triangle to his lapel. As he left the room, the folder felt cool in his hand, and the tightness in his belly began to ease.

He was alone in the dressing room, and he showered and changed quickly, savoring the decision to cancel, the tension draining away. The afternoon ahead, free, and then Marjorie. And Kaufman couldn't say anything, none of them could, not with his record. He started to whistle, forgetting the morning, forgetting his blue cards, happy as a schoolboy cutting classes.

The elation faded a bit in the commissary when he saw Vardakian slouched over the bar, but it was too late to get out with any grace. He liked the older man, respected his anarchic contempt for authority, but he didn't want company. Not now, not today, with Marjorie filling his mind, washing the morning clean.

"Hail, savior of the race." Var-

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dakian's swarthy monkey face creased into a crooked grin. "There's syntho-gin and syntho-Scotch, and it's hard to tell the difference. What'll it be?"

Gellert accepted a large Scotch, noting that the sterry barman wasn't even trying to hide his sullen contempt these days. The situation in the city was growing ugly now that the Republic of Allah had retreated towards Mississippi, and all the old resentments, muted in common peril, were bitterly resurfacing. It was even worse in New York, of course; riots, even some lynchings. Shit, if they only knew. He, for one, would switch any day.

"How did it go?" he asked abstractedly, his thoughts far away, and Vardakian snorted.

"I used the screener today, I was too beat to take the little darlings on in the flesh. Full color and sound, two blondes, an Arab hung like a camel, and lots of dildo action. My beakers brimmeth over."

Gellert knew he was lying. He wouldn't be through yet, and in any case the m.o., high on angel dust, had told him Vardakian was flaking out and they'd have to go into extraction soon. What the hell, Vardakian probably knew he knew. It happened to all of them, sooner or later. Brief butterflies, a spin in the sun, and then caterpillars again.

"I hear the French ambassador shot himself last night," he said, more to make conversation than out of any real interest, much less sympathy. He'd only met the man once, at a reception for the Canadian delegation, a vague, dusty figure, overdressed yet threadbare, not believing what had happened, lost.

Vardakian nodded glumly.

"I heard it on the exec channel before I came in. Christ, they're going to have to start censoring that too pretty soon. Apparently Marnais saw the high-altitude reconnaissance films we took over Paris. His family was there." He scowled into his drink. "It started in Marseilles, the rats I guess. Mutated maybe, they say there's no antidote. It's spreading into Germany too, twenty million dead already."

"Jesus." Gellert really felt nothing, it was too far away, but you had to say something. "And they weren't even touched during the Week."

Vardakian ordered another round.

"Paris is still beautiful, I'm told. Except for the bodies."

Gellert shook his head, finished his drink and got up.

"I'm taking off early. See you tomorrow."

Vardakian nodded, waving a hairy paw languidly.

"Don't blame you." As an afterthought: "Curran took a razor

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blade to himself last night. Overwork, that's the diagnosis." The laugh was metallic and Gellert shuddered involuntarily. That did get to him.

When he reached the roof the flier was waiting and fueled, but he'd ordered it for five, and the mechanic, another sterry, gave him a hard time about the change, then took ten minutes going over his flight plan. Gellert forced himself to be friendly, ignoring the hatred in the other man's eyes. Pushed too far, he might check out the landing with Richmond, and that was the last thing Gellert wanted. Up till now, there'd been no trouble, but you never knew. Not these days.

The trip took less than thirty minutes, flying low to avoid the radar screen, if it was still working, and Gellert felt the familiar surge of excitement when he saw the small farm. He eased the flier off automatic and set it down gently in a clearing near the main house, humming softly under his breath. He always felt the same muted joy before a visit, compounded of the promise of the evening and the sheer pleasure of skimming low over trees and meadows. There was little enough real countryside left around the capital, but the stretch he passed over on the way to the farm was verdant and unspoiled, its soft contours rippling under the first shadows of dusk. The May air was warm and honied with flowers. As always on these visits, he experienced an overwhelming awareness of everything about him. The most ordinary sights and sounds sprang up with new dimensions, fresh meaning, and even the routine of landing a flier became an adventure.

Marjorie's father was working in the rose garden, dressed in levis and a faded blue workshirt, a floppy straw hat perched precariously on the fringed dome of his bald head. He stood up, a trowel in one hand, and waved as Gellert crossed the clearing towards the house. The old man's face was flushed with exertion, sweat shining on the ruddy cheeks. He's never looked better, Gellert thought.

"She's still dressing, Paul. Come on into the house and I'll make us a drink."

Gellert smiled. I am smiling with fond indulgence, he thought, savoring the ripe anachronism of the words. "Marge's trouble is she can never pass a mirror, Mr. Baxter. I'm going to have to ban them from the house. The neighbors will probably think we're vampires, but at least I'll get her to the theater on time. Where can I put these?" He gestured to a long white flower box and a smaller heart-shaped box of candy tied with a flouncy red bow, which he carried awkwardly under one arm.

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"We'll take the flowers in to mother and have her put them in water. But don't let her see the chocolates. She's on one of her diet kicks, and if she digs into them she'll be after me first thing tomorrow when she hits the scales. Seems the calories around here are all my fault." He patted his bump of a paunch possessively and led the way into the house.

Mrs. Baxter came rushing out of the kitchen the moment the door closed behind them, a rosy apple dumpling of a woman with clear bouncing blue eyes and a young girl's smile. She squeezed Gellert's arm and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Paul Gellert, you look skinnier than ever!" She stepped back a foot and looked over his lean frame disapprovingly. "Margie is going to have to bring you out here more often and let us fatten you up. I don't know what they're feeding you in the city." She knew perfectly well, Gellert thought: powdered eggs and milk, synth-caps and a half pound of red meat every two weeks, but it didn't seeem to matter. He smiled warmly.

"I live from one of your meals to the next, Mrs. Baxter. Even Margie's beginning to suspect it's really you I'm after." The first touch of strangeness gone, the words fell lightly off his lips. Mrs. Baxter blushed but looked pleased.

"Well, I hope tonight's meal won't dampen your ardor, Paul. We couldn't get even proto-salt, and I had to use green apples for the pie. But we do have a good roast of lamb, and some of those little button mushrooms you liked last time."

Paul's tongue ran over his lower lip involuntarily. Outside of ExCom Headquarters there was nowhere within two hundred miles where he could find such a meal.

Mrs. Baxter took the flowers to the accompaniment of little clucking noises and bustled off to the kitchen. Her husband ushered Gellert into the comfortable, old-fashioned living room and offered him a cigar from a rosewood humidor on the mantle. It was real tobacco.

"It's good to see you again, son," he said, after they had both settled down in capacious leather armchairs in front of the fireplace, Gellert wishing it was winter and a real fire laid on in the hearth and crackling accompaniment to their words. "Paul, I hope it won't embarrass you, but there's something I want to say." The older man hesitated slightly. "To put it as simply as possible, and if you aren't aware of it already, in the past few months mother and I have come to look upon you as more than just another of Margie's beaus. We consider you one of the family."

He picked up a cut-glass de-

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canter from the small coffee table near his chair and poured them both a glass of sherry.

"I just want you to know that if your intentions towards Marge are what I think they are, you have our blessings and our deepest hopes for your happiness together. With or without mirrors," he finished, looking more than a little embarrassed himself. Gellert felt a surge of elation. This was good, this was the way it should be. He leaned forward in his chair and spoke intently.

"Mr. Baxter, I love Margie with all my heart and soul. I'll do everything in my power to make her happy, now and forever." The words raced over each other, and he trembled slightly, but the older man didn't seem to notice.

"God bless you both then." He held up his glass in a silent toast, and they both sipped their glasses of sherry. Real sherry.

"Well, I hope you two aren't getting squizzled without me!" Gellert swung around at the sound of the lilting voice and saw Marjorie standing in the doorway. He jumped to his feet. "Darling!" He couldn't think of anything else to say and felt suddenly awkward and out of place again, unreal. The girl in the doorway was young and slender, with a dancer's body and bright, laughing eyes. She wore her hair long, in the old style, and it framed the white oval of her face in a glistening black aureole. Gellert couldn't take his eyes from the soft smiling lips, moist and red as one of her father's roses. Jesus, he thought, she is lovely!

The girl walked across the room, the flared skirt of her pale-blue evening gown whispering against slim legs, and took Gellert's hand in hers. She looked up into his eyes and an unspoken promise passed between them.

After dinner, Gellert and Baxter strolled back into the living room for a glass of port while Marjorie and Mrs. Baxter took care of the dishes. "God, I haven't eaten like that since I was a kid," Gellert said reverently. "I had trouble believing it was really *food* I was putting down. When you're eating that powdered yak dung they feed us in the city, you begin to forget there's anything better."

Baxter swirled his port in the glass, looking down. "There is, son," he said softly. "There is." For a moment his eyes were shadowed, distant. Then, perceptibly, he brightened. "Let's get in a few games while the gals are busy. I think I've worked out a defense for that knight-rook onslaught of yours." They set up the chessboard and played in quiet satisfaction for the better part of an hour. Outside, the crickets began to sing in the darkness.

By the time Marjorie returned,

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her father was down two games and behind a bishop in the third. He stood up from the chessboard and stretched, yawning. "Your young man's too good for me, Marge. I'll hand him over to you before he forks me again and I start sulking."

His daughter smiled and took Gellert by the hand. "You can play those records you've been saving. Paul and I are going to get a little air out on the porch." She turned to Gellert. "Mom and dad have got hold of some pre-Week opera records, real ones, from the old Metropolitan in New York. *La Boheme, Madame Butterfly,* and with live orchestras. They've been playing them over and over like two kids!"

Gellert looked at Baxter with a touch of envy. "I don't know how you do it, sir. Perhaps you'd leave the porch door open so we can hear them too."

The older man smiled. "With pleasure. Though when I was your age and out on a swing with a pretty girl, I had more on my mind than music."

Marjorie pulled Gellert into the hallway. Her laughter was light, wholy natural. "When you were a young man, Dad, you could have gone to the Metropolitan itself any night of the week you wanted to."

"Yes." The shadow passed over Baxter's eyes for a second again, and he reached for the port.

The minute Gellert and the girl were safe in the darkness of the porch, she was in his arms, her lips searching for his. "Darling," she whispered, "oh, my dearest darling, my love." Her kisses were like none he had ever known, soothing and exciting at the same time, cool as a flower and passionately urgent. After a moment, as they parted for breath, she looked up at him, and her eyes were clear and trusting. Then the words came, of tenderness, endearment, longing, and he whispered them to her and stroked her hair as they held each other silently in the dark, like two children. Oh yes God, this is the way, he thought, dear God, this is the way!

After a while they sat down on the swing, and he put his arms around her, cradling her, and she rested her head on his shoulder. Once, his hand brushed against her firm young breasts but he snatched it away and the sudden shudder of revulsion passed quickly and was soon forgotten. Through the open front door came the music, faint but clear, the rich Italian words melting into the Virginian night. *"Un bel di, vedremo..."* The faith of a long-dead Butterfly, burst out of her waxen chrysalis, resurrected just for tonight and the two of them. There has never been anything like this, he thought as he felt Marjorie's body warmly stirring close to his and smelled the clean, exciting scent of her hair. Never,

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and it is worth it, all of it. He gently released her hand from his and reached into his side coat pocket, bringing out a small box. "Darling," he said softly, "this is for you." She laughed delightedly and held the box up to the faint light trickling onto the porch from the living room. The diamond glistened in the darkness. She gasped and threw her arms around him. "Oh, Paul, it's beautiful, beautiful! But you shouldn't have, just for me!"

"It's not just a gift," he said softly, tensely. "It's called an engagement ring. If you accept it, it means that you agree to marry me, to live with me forever, with no one else." His voice faltered. "Do you... I mean...."

"Oh, Paul, of course I accept!" Her arms tightened around his neck. "You know you're the only one for me, for always!" Her lips met his and her slender fingers ran lightly through his hair.

"Thank you, darling, thank you," he breathed. "I'll never leave you, never." He sought for words, for the concepts. "We'll have children, children of our own. A boy. A boy and a girl!" He was almost incoherent with joy. "We'll raise them ourselves and send them to schools, and they'll live with us until they're old enough to be on their own." She nodded assent to everything he said, and he clutched her to him, speaking deliriously of the little house they would have in the country, of the vacations they would take, in California, someday even in Europe, and, more immediately, of their honeymoon. "Hawaii, maybe, or a long cruise. That's it, a cruise in the Caribbean, Bermuda, Haiti, the Bahamas...." The storybook names ran over each other. He kissed her again, his lips desperate with the promise of the future, the music drifting around them like dew. "We'll be so happy, darling!" he cried, over and over again.

After a while they decided to go in and tell her parents the news. "Your father already approves. I hope your mother agrees with him."

Her fingers touched his lips, tenderly. "Silly! Of course she does. She adores you. They both adore you."

Hand in hand they entered the house and walked into the living room. Mr. Baxter sat sipping his port, lost in the music.

"Paul wants to tell you something, Dad," Marjorie said, and he looked up, momentarily startled. When he saw their faces he smiled broadly.

"I think I know what it is," he said. "Wait a moment, Mother will want to hear the good news. She's out in the kitchen fixing us all some coffee and...."

A woman's scream, abrupt and

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piercing, cut through his words. They stood stunned, disbelieving. A door slammed and there was a sound of voices in the hall. Suddenly, Mrs. Baxter was flung into the room. She fell to her knees on the carpet, sobbing softly, as three men appeared in the doorway behind her, dressed in grey ExCom uniforms. The man in the lead, red epaulets on his shoulders, dangled a gun loosely from one hand. He looked at the frozen tableau before him with contempt, and then down at Mrs. Baxter.

"Still at it, Annie." His voice was low, cold. "I guess Baltimore wasn't enough of a lesson for you. But this is the last little establishment you'll be running for quite a while." His eyes swung on Marjorie. "I see you've got a new one. Young too." He sighed and turned to Baxter and Gellert, a note almost of appeal in his voice. "I just don't get you reverts! You should be goddamn grateful you've got it as soft as you have. Your own transport, private living quarters, expense allotments, not to mention the women, *our* women, and you act as if servicing your quota's some kind of punishment." He gestured towards the door with his gun. "Get out to our flier. Moss, Craddock, watch them. Annie, you and the girl get your things together. You won't be coming back."

Mrs. Baxter choked back sobs, her face contorting with rage. "You high and mighty shits are all the same! Don't I have to make a living? Do you think I enjoy catering to these nuts? But it's better than digging up rubble for two credits a day and the slush Rehab calls food. Why don't you just leave us alone? We're not hurting anybody."

The man in the grey uniform looked suddenly tired. "These people are sick, Annie. They need help, and what's more important, we need them. The survival of this country is up to the norms." He almost hissed the last word, and his voice tightened. "Escape houses like yours impair their proper functioning, and that undermines the State. When you hit these characters for a thousand credits a night, it's really your country that's paying the price. Maybe to you it's just business, but I'd call it pretty damn close to treason." His mouth snapped into a thin line and he jerked a thumb towards the door.

Silently, the two guards prodded Gellert and Baxter out towards the waiting fliers, past Marjorie and her "mother". The younger girl averted her eyes, but the old woman shrieked at them as they passed. "You fucking freaks! I wish I'd never gotten mixed up with any of you!"

Outside, Gellert and Baxter were pushed roughly against the

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side of a military flier. The security men lit cigarettes and chatted desultorily a few feet away, their faces bored masks. Baxter looked at Gellert sadly.

"Well, son, it was fun while it lasted."

Gellert was still in a mild state of shock. "I didn't think this would happen... I mean, I heard this place was safe, that they had the local civcops fixed."

The older man smiled sympathetically. "They did. This is a federal operation, unfortunately. Security's been cracking down a lot recently."

"What... what will they do to me... to us...?"

Baxter was still smiling. "Your first pinch, eh?" Gellert nodded bleakly. "I thought so. Well, probably nothing will happen to you, except a reprimand from your jurisdictional supervisor. In my case, it's a bit more complicated. They've got me a few times in past cleanups. Last year I was picked up when they raided a Church. Right in New City, camouflaged in a basement. Perfect replica, wooden pews, altar, hymn singing, coffee and cake courtesy of the Ladies' Auxiliary, the whole bit. They told me then that the next time it'd be lobotomy." The smile remained fixed. "Not that I really care. They'd probably be doing me a favor at that. At least I could take on my daily quotas with no qualms. No subversive dreams of the old days, no romantic escapist fantasies. Just a grinning, fornicating robot, a fertility machine programmed for the rehabilitation of the State and the glory of ExCom." He shrugged faintly. "I'm fifty-six, and my fertility's going, not to mention my stamina. They'll be shipping me to the sleep shop pretty soon, in any case."

Gellert wasn't really listening. All he could remember was the taste of Marjorie's lips, the scent of her hair, the plans they had made for the future. He reached out a hand and clutched at the older man's sleeve.

"Baxter... was it really like tonight in the old days? I mean... marriage, courtship, families?"

Baxter didn't answer for a moment. "Yes, it was like that," he said finally, in a soft voice, "and a lot of other things too, good and bad, seamy and once in a while pretty wonderful. It's hard to describe to anybody born after the Week. God knows, we never thought it was any great shakes at the time. But now... now...."

He fell silent, listening to the sound of the crickets in the trees. Miles to the north, over Washington Crater, a blue glow of radiation shimmered above the ground, fading and swelling like the pulse of a human heart.

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THE OPPOSITE POLES

As it happens, I am very accessible. It is not at all difficult to dig up my address or my phone number. I make no particular secret of them. I have no desire to withdraw or to hide.

This creates alarm and despondency in the hearts of those near and dear to me, however, for they have visions of my being bothered to death by all kinds of well-meaning (or eccentric) individuals.

In response, I explain that I have faith in my Gentle Readers. They are, by and large, judging by those I have seen and heard from, an intelligent and considerate lot, who do not take undue advantage of me. My letter box is usually full; my phone rings often; but both letters and phone calls are invariably reasonable ones, not overlong, and make not many demands.

But then, every once in a while—

Not very long ago, the phone rang at 3:30 A.M. What's more, it was not the particular phone which is in my bedroom that rang, but another one several rooms away. At that time of night and on that phone, I expected disaster. I assumed it was one of my children, and I further assumed it was a dire emergency.

Fortunately, I sleep lightly and

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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I wake quickly. Patter, patter, patter, went my bare feet on the floor, and I was at the phone.

"Hello," I said, in breathless apprehension.

"Dr. Asimov?" came the eager voice of a stranger.

"Yes. Who is this?"

Still eager. "I want to speak to you, Dr. Asimov, and ask —"

"Wait a while. Do you know it is 3:30 A.M.?"

There was a slight pause as though the stranger stopped to wonder a bit at my reason for introducing so irrelevant a fact. "Yes, of course," he said.

"Why do you call me at 3:30 A.M.?" I asked.

He said, "I'm a night-owl," as though surprised I didn't know.

And I answered in the same tone of voice, "And I'm not," and hung up on him. It was rude of me but I really felt justified.

That some people are night-owls and some are not is a truism, and I was rather chagrined to think that somewhere among my readers is a young man so idiotic as to fail to realize this pair of opposites exists and to assume that his own personal peculiarities are standard for the whole world.

But a writer can find something useful in anything. Musing on opposites before I drifted off to sleep again, I found my writing strategy for this article.

In the previous two essays, I discussed the small periodic astronomic changes that might possibly cause the periodic Ice Ages on Earth. However, the changes in Earth's motions have been going along for uncounted millions of years, presumably, while the periodic Ice Ages have been a matter only of the last million years on Earth. Before that, there was something like 250 million years without Ice Ages, as nearly as we can tell.

Somewhere there is an asymmetry, and if we look, we can find it on Earth's surface. There we find (aha!) opposites. These opposites are, of course, land and sea — solid and liquid — stay-put and flowing. And those opposites are *not* symmetrically distributed. Given that, let us see how this might affect the Ice Ages.

We can begin by supposing Earth's surface to be symmetrical with respect to these opposites.

Supose, for instance, that the Earth's land surface was restricted to the Tropic Zone. We would have a belt of land (possibly broken by narrow

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arms of the sea) around Earth's middle and a broad and unbroken ocean taking up the Temperate and Frigid Zones on both sides of the land, north and south. Earth would then have two polar oceans, and the land-sea distribution would be symmetrical.

At either pole, freezing would take place. Sea water freezes at a temperature of -2° C. (29° F.), and the conditions at the poles will produce temperatures lower than this in the winter time.

An icy layer will cover these portions of the ocean then, and it may cover an area as great as 13,000,000 square kilometers (5,000,000 square miles) at its maximum extent in the depth of winter. This is nearly 1 1/2 times the area of the United States. In the summer, much of the ice layer will melt, and no more than perhaps 10,000,000 square kilometers (3,900,000 square miles) will remain covered.

The two poles will alternate in this matter. When the North Pole has its maximum cover of solid ice, the South Pole will have its minimum cover; and vice versa.

At any one moment, an Earth with polar oceans will have some 23,000,000 square kilometers (8,900,000 square miles) covered with ice. This amounts to about 4.5 percent of the Earth's surfface.

This sea ice, however, would not be very thick. Ice is a good insulator and once some of it has formed, the water underneath the layer loses heat only slowly through the ice overhead and therefore freezes only very slowly. The thicker the ice layer gets, the more slowly you can expect the water underneath to freeze.

The freezing process is slowed further by the fact that the ocean is a fluid and is divided into currents that tend to equalize its temperature. Heat enters the polar ocean from the warmer tropics, and this, too, limits the freezing under the ice layer.

To be sure, snow falls on top of the ice, and that will add to its thickness, but that will also force the layer deeper into the water where some will melt.

After a winter of ordinary length and intensity the sea ice may end with an average thickness of no more than about 1.5 meters (5 feet) at its maximum in the dead of winter. The total cubic volume of ice on an Earth with two polar oceans would thus be about 34,500 cubic kilometers (8,300 cubic miles). This is about 1/35,000 of Earth's supply of water — an inconsiderable amount.

What happens if the small astronomic changes I discussed in the earlier articles produce a change in Earth's overall weather?

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If the summer temperature cools somewhat, a little less ice melts, so a little more ice remains. This could trigger further change, since the more ice serves to reflect more sunlight into space, thus cooling the summers a little further and encouraging still more ice formation.

This, however, would not go too far. The ocean circulation sees to it that there is a heat-leak poleward from the tropics. The further equatorward the ice creeps, the more effective is the leak, so that a new equilibrium is established that is not radically different from what existed before.

Consequently, the slow alternation of Ice Ages and milder periods between would see the polar ice expand somewhat and contract somewhat, over and over again. We might suppose that at the depth of an Ice Age, the thin layer of sea ice would extend an additional couple of million kilometers beyond the interglacial limits, and the effects of that would not be enormous.

We might even argue that the effects would be beneficial to life generally. Sea life depends, in part, on the amount of oxygen dissolved in sea water, and that amount increases as the temperature of the water decreases. The near-freezing cold water of the polar regions contains some 60 percent more oxygen than the luke-warm water of the tropics. (It is for this reason that sea life is particularly rich in the polar oceans, and why it is in cold-water currents that the world's great fisheries exist.)

On a planet with polar oceans, sea life would expand, prosper and flourish during an Ice Age, and land life on the tropical continents might indirectly benefit, too.

One other point — Sea ice, present or absent, expanding or diminishing, would not affect the sea level. When water freezes to the slightly less dense form of ice, it expands. The frozen water, however, floats on the ice, with only a portion of itself submerged. The submerged portion is exactly equal in volume to that of the water which has frozen.

This means that land life on the tropical continents would be unaffected by the fact that far to the south and north, the sea ice was expanding and contracting — at least as far as the sea itself was concerned. The waters would neither slink down the beach with the years, nor creep up it.

Now let us move to another kind of symmetrical condition. Let us leave most of Earth's continents in the tropics as before, but let's move some of the land to the poles. We will imagine Earth with two polar continents,

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each surrounded by a broad unbroken ocean.

To be specific let us suppose that each pole is occupied by a more or less circular continent, with the pole more or less at the center, and that the area of this continent is 13,100,000 square kilometers (5,000,000 square miles).

What would be the situation now?

We can suppose, to begin with, that the continents are bare, their surfaces simply exposed rock. In the polar winter, the temperature of the bare surface would drop. It would drop faster than the temperature of water would in similar circumstances because the "specific heat" of rock is lower than that of water. An amount of heat-loss that would reduce the temperature of a particular volume of water by one degree, would reduce the temperature of that same volume of rock five degrees.

Moreover, the temperature of sea water will sink only to its freezing point, and it will then freeze. The water beneath the ice will stay at that freezing point and will serve as a heat source that will prevent the ice above from cooling as much as it otherwise might.

The dry land of the polar continents, however, will cool as far down as the heat-loss makes necessary and, since land does not flow, there are no land currents to bring heat in from outside. Therefore, the temperature of the land might, in the far interior and at the depth of winter, drop to below -100° C. (-148° F.)

In the polar summer, when the Sun may be low in the sky but when it shines for long periods of time (up to six months at a time at the poles themselves), the exposed land would rise in temperature to perhaps even mild levels — but the land doesn't remain exposed.

The surrounding ocean is the source of water vapor in the air, and this can condense and precipitate (under polar temperature conditions) as snow. During the polar winter, snow will fall on the polar continent. Not very much snow will fall, since the air will be too cold to hold such vapor, but some will, and the continent will receive a snow cover.

This means that in the polar summer, the Sun's heat will be devoted not to raising the temperature, but to melting the ice. It takes as much heat to melt a particular weight of ice as it would take to raise the temperature of that weight of water by 80 Celsius degrees (144 F. degrees).

This means that the polar continent remains cold during the summer and, in fact, that the Sun, hovering low in the sky, will not manage to melt all the snow that fell in the previous winter.

The next winter therefore sees a thicker snow cover, as new snow is

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added to the leftover of the previous winter; and the winter after that sees a still thicker one. There will, in the end, be a far thicker ice layer over land than, under the same conditions, over the sea, because there would be no land currents to bring in heat and melt the ice from below.

Eventually, the layer of ice would be about 2 kilometers (1 1/4 miles) thick on the average (with a maximum thickness in the interior of about 4.3 kilometers (2.7 miles) perhaps). It would spread over an area of nearly 15,000,000 square kilometers (5,800,000 square miles), an area that would include the entire continent and some of the shallow inlets and bays along its shores.

The total quantity of ice would amount to 30,000,000 cubic kilometers (7,200,00 cubic miles) on each polar continent, or 60,000,000 cubic kilometers (14,400,000 cubic miles) altogether, and very little of it would melt in the summer.

The ice forming on polar continents would be nearly 1,750 times as great in amount as that forming on polar oceans. The polar continental ice would make up about 4.8 percent of all the water on Earth.

Would the ice pile up indefinitely on the polar continents until the entire ocean was on them in a precarious heap more than 40 kilometers (25 miles) high?

No. Ice is plastic under pressure, and when a few kilometers of it has piled up it tends to spread out like very stiff wax. Chunks of it (icebergs) split off the edge of the ice sheet and drift off into the surrounding ocean, amid what sea ice has formed there. This loss eventually balances the gain through snowfall, so that the volume and thickness of the icesheet reaches an equilibrium.

The icebergs are frozen fresh water, while sea ice traps brine between the freezing crystals and is therefore quite salty, and fresh ice melts less easily than salty ice does. Then, too, the icebergs are far thicker than the sea ice is and therefore take a longer time to melt. (Nevertheless, icebergs wander equatorward and melt eventually.)

In short, the ice surrounding a polar continent forms, together with the ice of the continent itself, a far greater reservoir of cold (or a far more effective heat-sink if you prefer to look at it from the other direction) than a polar ocean does.

Hence a planet with a pair of polar continents would end up far more icy and far colder, than the same planet with polar oceans, even though all the astronomical conditions were the same in either case.

What would Ice Ages be like on a planet with two polar continents and

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the remaining land (if any) in the tropics? Again, the change would not be much. The polar continents themselves could not very well be buried still deeper even if the summers grew somewhat cooler, for accumulating ice would accelerate the flattening out and cause the formation of icebergs at a greater rate. Therefore the sea surrounding the polar ocean would tend to get icier, again to a limited extent because of water circulation from the still warm tropics.

One thing, though. The ice piled up on a polar continent is removed from the sea, so that if affects the sea level. If, for any reason, the ice on the two polar continents were to melt entirely, the water would run off the continents into the sea, and the sea level would be raised about 125 meters (420 feet). This would be a serious problem to land life.

However, such total melting would not be likely. The shifts in planetary weather between the Ice Age and the mild conditions between, on a planet in Earth's present astronomical situation, would not be great enough to affect seriously the polar continent's ice cap one way or the other.

Thus, the Earth would not be affected much by Ice Ages if it had either two polar oceans or two polar continents provided any other land were in the tropics.

You could have a compromise. There could be a polar continent at one pole only and a polar ocean at the other, with the remaining land in the tropics. You could, in this way, have two opposite poles, opposite not only in terms of geographic location, but in physical character.

In that case, the Ice Ages would still not have a great effect on Earth, but the polar asymmetry would produce a vast difference between the northern and southern hemispheres, as one pole and not the other would serve as virtually the only cold reservoir on Earth. It would be interesting to study the lopsided currents in the ocean and atmosphere in such a case.

This case of polar asymmetry not only *could* be so, it *is* so (to a certain extent) on Earth. The Earth's South Pole is occupied by a nearly circular continent, Antarctica, with the South Pole nearly centered on it. Indeed, all my figures for a polar continent's ice cap are based on the actual state of affairs in Antarctica, the ice of which contains 2 percent of Earth's water supply. (If the Antarctic ice cap should ever all melt, it would raise the sea level by about 60 meters, or 200 feet.)

The Earth's North Pole, however, is oceanic and is occupied by a nearly circular arm of the ocean, the Arctic Ocean, which is about as large

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as Antarctica and is covered with sea ice. Indeed, all my figures for a polar ocean's sea ice is based on the actual state of affairs in the Arctic Ocean.

(The opposite nature of Earth's poles is somewhat spoiled by the fact that there is a miniature Antarctica in the far north, too. The large northern island of Greenland has a huge ice cap, second in size only to Antarctica's — but with only 1/10 the mass of the Antarctica ice cap.)

In such a case, it is the South Polar region that is Earth's refrigerator, far more than the North Polar region is; and the disparity would be greater still were it not for Greenland. It is the cold waters of the ocean off Antarctica that tend to fertilize all the rest of the world. The cold Antarctic waters are rich in oxygen, and being heavy with cold, seep northward at the bottom of the ocean, aerating it. When these cold waters well upward for any reason, they bring minerals up, too, so that where this happens, the ocean teems with life. Without the Antarctic waters, Earth's ocean would support only a comparatively limited amount of life, and Earth's land surface would be the poorer for it, too.

The effect of the Antarctic ice-box on the southern half of the planet is enormous. There is an island in the Indian Ocean called Kerguelen Island after its discoverer, or Desolation Island after its characteristics. It is a semi-polar island, frigid and tempest-ridden, with snowfields and glaciers. It is at a latitude of 49° S. At 49° N, in comparison, we have the cities of Paris and Vancouver.

I have explained that whether you have a polar ocean or a polar continent, the small falls and rises in summer temperature that are due to Earth's astronomical situation don't produce much — just a relatively minor expansion and contraction of the sea ice in the case of polar oceans, and of the iceberg fields in the case of polar continents.

Ah, but remember that this was on the assumption that Earth's land surface was in the tropics, far from either pole, and this is not so in fact. The land surface is distributed asymmetrically, and that, after the nature of the poles, is the second important asymmetry on the Earth's surface.

As it happens, the Earth's land surface is distributed lopsidedly in favor of the northern hemisphere. This means there is not much land near the South Pole (except for Antarctica itself, of course). In fact the only land area of any consequence, south of 40° S is Patagonia, the narrowing southern tip of South America, and a frigid and unattractive land it is.

Consequently, the Southern Hemisphere is fairly immune to the effects of Ice Ages or of the mild periods between. The Antarctica ice cap has

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been there very much as it is today for at least 20 million years. A little expansion or contraction of the iceberg fields and that's it.

The polar ocean at the North Pole, however, doesn't fit my original assumptions at all. It is *not* open ocean with no land within thousands of kilometers. The Arctic Ocean is, in fact, almost landlocked, with the only considerable connection with the rest of the ocean a 1600-kilometer (1000-mile) wide stretch of water between Greenland and Scandinavia, and even this is partially blocked by the island of Iceland.

Furthermore, the land that surrounds the Arctic Ocean is not inconsiderable in extent. North of 40° N. is not only Greenland and a number of other large islands, but all of Europe and two-thirds of North America and Asia.

This northern land makes all the difference. Whereas the snow that falls during the Southern Hemisphere winter falls, for the most part, on Antarctica's ice or on ocean water, the snow that falls during the Northern Hemisphere winter falls over vast land areas of North America, Asia and Europe.

The land surfaces on which the snow falls cool down and retain the snow cover through the winter. This means there is snow over millions of square kilometers that were bare in the summer.

Those square kilometers are bare again the next summer, for they lie farther from the pole than do Antarctica and Greenland, and there is enough solar heat to melt that thin layer completely.

But now suppose the astronomic changes discussed in the previous articles produce slightly cooler summers so there is less than usual melting in the summer for year after year. There will then be a tendency to have a little snow left all through the summer in places like northern Siberia, northern Scandinavia, northeastern Canada, in places where the earlier warmer summers would have melted them.

That sets off the Ice Age trigger by increasing the reflectivity of Earth's surface and therefore cooling the summers further, reducing the melting further, and making sure that an even larger extent of ice covers the bare land areas of the north throughout the year — which further increases Earth's reflectivity and so on.

This trigger works beautifully, unlike the situation in the open polar ocean or in the sea surrounding a polar continent, for on land the trigger action is not blunted by oceanic circulation.

The snow piles up, turns to ice, and then to glaciers, which advance southward. At the height of an Ice Age, there are five extensive ice sheets

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on Earth. There are the two that have been permanent for millions of years (Greenland and Antarctica) and in addition, three that form only in the Ice Ages, and only in the Northern Hemisphere. These are the Canadian, the Scandinavian, and the Siberian, with the Canadian the largest.

All in all, when the ice sheets are at their farthest extent, the ice covers over 45,000,000 square kilometers (17,400,000 square miles) of land, three times the amount covered by the present two icecaps. This amounts to just about 1/3 of the Earth's land surface. The total volume of ice may amount to 75,000,000 cubic kilometers (18,000,000 cubic miles), which amounts to about 1/20 of the total water supply on Earth.

Amazingly, it turns out that even at the maximum depth of an Ice Age, the ocean remains little affected. The amount of water in the ocean, when the ice has spread out as far as it ever gets is 97 percent of what it is now, when two of the ice sheets still exist. Sea life is scarcely affected, except perhaps for the better, as the ocean cools slightly and holds more oxygen.

What's more, the accumulation of ice on land surfaces lowers the sea level by about 100 meters (320 feet), so that the continental shelves are virtually exposed, this new land making up for the land covered by the ice.

Then, of course, when the astronomical situation shifts back to warmer summers and there is a little more melting in the summer than there is ice formation in the winter, the reverse trigger is set into operation and the glaciers begin their retreat.

This asymmetry of Ice Age situations in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres still doesn't explain why Ice Ages are characteristic of the last million years, and not of vast stretches of time before that.

That is because the dramatic and spectacular scenario that involves the formation and disappearance of huge ice sheets, depends upon two things, a polar ocean to serve as a water supply and large continental areas crowding in on it to serve as a land base for glacier formation.

That is exactly the situation now, but it was not always so. There is continental drift you see, so that the pattern of the continents continually changes. Until a million years ago, apparently, the Arctic Ocean was too open. The nearest continental areas were too far south to serve as adequate bases for ice sheets. Even slightly cooler summers didn't get cool enough that far south to allow the ice to accumulate.

Apparently the astronomical movements described in my last two articles only produce dramatic results when either pole gets land-crowded, without quite being land-occupied, as the North Pole is now — and that

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seems to happen only every 250,000,000 years or so.

It's my guess that the asymmetry of continental arrangements allows a succession of Ice Ages only during 1 percent of the Earth's history (assuming Earth's astronomical situation to have always been what it is today), and we just happen to have had the human species developing at a time that is at the short end of that 1 in a 100 chance.

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In which the Reverend Crispin Mobey ("Not With A Bang But A Bleep," June 1977) visits his homeland, the country of Transylvanshire in Merrie Old England, and finds that his roots lead to some very odd places.

Lhude Sing Cuccu!

by GARY JENNINGS

The Rev. Floyd Clyde Flifford
Shepherd-in-Chief,
Missionary Flock
Southern Primitive Protestant
Church
World Headquarters
Abysmuth, Mississippi, U.S.A.

Dear Reverend Shepherd Flifford:

Even before you read this letter, sir, please hasten to send five hundred dollars ($500.00) to Oscar Wild, Esq., c/o Pension Morpion, Berneval-sur-Mer, France, so that I may escape from this wretched place and, chastened by my recent brush with arrant paganism, rush home to the motherly arms of Southern Primitive Protestantism. You are not being asked to send money to a stranger. It is I, Crispin Mobey, your SoPrim missionary-on-sabbatical. Well, formerly on sabbatical, currently in exile in France.

The young Anglican curate who helped me to flee across the Channel, in a false and extremely itchy beard, suggested that I book my ferry passage and my reservations at this pension under the odd but impenetrable alias of Oscar Wild. At least, that's what I understood him to say; the curate seemed to be somewhat choked-up at the time, and I was unstrung by the distressing commotion of my precipitate departure from Merrie Olde England.

Merrie, indeed! But not near so drear as this seaside string of decrepit boardinghouses known as Berneval-sur-Mer. Except for the surly staff members of the several pensions, and some even surlier shopkeepers, the entire population consists of elderly English remittance men, cashiered Royal Army officers, and the like, who spend all their time sitting beshawled in wicker rockers, guzzling claret and gazing mournfully at the smogbank

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of England across the water. An unsociable lot. They never volunteer their names and seem startled, even affronted, when I cheerily introduce myself as Oscar Wild.

They could hardly recoil more violently if I were to reveal myself as the notorious Crispin Mobey now being publicly pilloried in the world's yellow press. I have no doubt that by now you too, Reverend Shepherd-in-Chief, will have heard of the horrendous scandal which drove me from England. If our own *SoPrim Sunday Sentinel* hasn't picked up the story from the wire services, certainly such sensationalist sheets as the *Christian Science Monitor* must have headlined the embarrassing news reports out of sheer malice. But you must also know that you have not yet been vouchsafed the full story. Let me give you the unadulterated truth of it:

In 19--, in the month of S-------, I came to the village of M-------on-S----- in remotest T---------shire ...

Why am I writing like that? It must be a residual effect of all the old stories about England which I read as orientation for my visit there. Surely you know what year it is, reverend sir, and you already knew my destination. And there is only one month in the year that begins with S. I wonder why all English stories used to commence that way ...

Well, let me begin again, and a bit before the beginning. After the unhappy events attendant upon my mission to Oblivia and my ignominious expulsion from that benighted backwater of South America, I returned to our headquarters in sophisticated Mississippi, so much disillusioned and downcast in spirit that I desired a temporary relief from missionary work. (I remember how our Monitor of Foreign Missions, dear old absent-minded Reverend Killikak, got all tongue-tied when he laid my request before you, sir: "Missionary work desires a temporary relief from Crispin Mobey.")

Anyway, you kindly granted me this sabbatical, and I decided that it would best be spent in trying to draw new strength of soul from the sturdy earth of my native heath. That is, I determined to visit the land from which my forebears had emigrated, centuries ago, to the then-new colony of Virginia. We Virginia Mobeys, as you know, originally sprang from the soil of the English country called Transylvanshire — and it was thence that I repaired.

My all-economy-class Ugandan Airways DC-2 — after some emergency repair and bomb-search stops in Alabama, Georgia, Bermuda, the Azores, Lisbon, and interim places where we dined on box lunches — landed only sixty-some

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hours late at Heathrow Aerodrome (Airport) outside London. There I had a bit of trouble finding my way through the interminable corridors whose walls are painted with cartoons of American 747 jumbo jets (slyly caricatured as ungainly and Dumboish elephants) and cartoons of sleek British Concords (idealized as swans). At last I found a cab rank, and, to the beet-nosed driver of the first jalopy in the line, I ebulliently cried:

"To London! To merry London, my most kindly nurse, this life's first native source! Oh, London is a fine town,/ A very famous city,/ Where all the streets are paved with gold/ And all the maidens pretty! When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford!"

"Arr," said the beet-nosed driver.

We rattled east along the Great West Road of development housing and gasworks, a dispiriting drizzle obscuring the scenery. I early discovered that S-------- is not the ideal month for weather in England; I have not yet discovered which is. When the beet-nosed driver drew up at a kerb (curb) somewhere in midcity, he growled, "Ele'm fifty." I perceived that he had taken me for an American and was quoting the fare in dollars and cents. Eager to show off my newly acquired familiarity with British currency, I said brightly, "Come, come, my man. How much is that in shillings and pence?"

"Arr. Y'bin in a nunnery, guvnor, y'ain't 'eard the bloody quid's bin decimated? Gimme ele'm pun, fifty pence, and nick off."

I found out later that I *had* been "taken" for an American and outrageously bilked on the cabfare. Right then, however, I was still full of rejoicing at being in Merrie Olde London, though this neighbourhood of it — one of the seedier sections of Soho, I learned — was hardly conductive to jubilation. I stood on the kerb (curb) and set down my valise so I could fling both arms wide and declaim into the soot, grit, fumes and drizzle:

"O her lamps of a night! Her rich goldsmiths, print-shops, toy-shops, pastry-cooks, Saint Paul's, the Strand, Charing Cross! These are thy gods, O London! .... The paintings of Gainsborough — 'Little Boy Bluebeard!' The poetry of Sheets! Of Kelly! .... This royal throne of kings, this specter'd isle! This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land!"

"Oh, not so dear, dearie," said a frazzled slattern who materialized out of the murk, bedizened with flowers and furbelows. "On'y a quid a thrash."

I declined what I took to be her offer to sell some of her profusion of flowers and asked her for direc-

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tions to the nearest YMCA. She muttered something about Squeers, whom I knew to be a character in Dickens — even the commonfolk of England are conversant with their classic literature — and directed me to "go to 'Artford, 'Ereford and 'Ampshire" as she melted back into the murk.

I went in search of that address, but no other passerby had ever heard of such a junction of streets. I found myself eventually at the obtrusively Yankeeish McDonald's eatery near Buckingham Palace and, being hungry after those fried-banana box lunches en route, ordered the delux Duke of Edin-Burger (a rather greasy-and vinegary version of a Big Mac). I also got directions to a YMCA.

I had planned to allot perhaps a week of my leave to cultural pursuits in London. But I could find no one to tell me where to find any residence or relics of poets Kelly or Sheets. I was apprised that the Gainsborough I wanted most to see is in a California collection. When I went looking for a miserable little match-girl to whom I might give a kindly farthing, I found only a smirking wench of a cigarette-girl nearly nude in a Bunny costume. At Westminster Abbey the only tomb whose occupant I knew even by reputation was that of Benedict Arnold. After two drizzly days of such disappointments, and of living on Duke of EdinBurgers, I decided to press on to Transylvanshire and bought a ticket to the major railway terminus in that county, a town spelled Meminghamsborough and pronounced Meems.

I sat in the dining car eating my first really English meal — mutton and Brussel sprouts — as the train trundled northeastward from London, through such evocatively named garden spots as Leighton Buzzard, Bulkington and Bletchley, then over the River Meese, through Measham and Much Wenlock (all these three names likewise pronounced Meems). (I get the impression, reverend sir, that almost every place-name in the United Kingdom is pronounced Meems, except Hampshire, which is spelled Hants.) From Meminghams-borough-Meems, I was the solitary passenger in an ancient omnibus which crept — almost reluctantly, it seemed — into the dismal "downs" of deepest Transylvanshire.

In England, the downs are really ups. I mean hills. These Transylvanian downs were September-sere, drizzle-draped, barren brown moorlands over which a wind whined ceaselessly. My wheezy conveyance stopped finally in the chill shadow of a towering black crag, topped by a ruin which might once have been a somewhat dinky castle. Here at the foot of the

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crag was the ancestral home, the natal town of us Mobeys; our root source; our chthonos; the minuscule and moribund village of Meaching-on-Smarm.

Stiff and grimy from the long journey, I trudged through the drizzle to the hamlet's only hotel, the Meaching-on-Smarm Arms. The Arms were forlornly empty. The entry above mine in the hotel register was dated 1937, and the entire staff: proprietor, landlord, landlady, host and hostess, publican and cook — in toto, Mr. and Mrs. Rubin Fleecebumpkin, licensees — crowded close to watch me sign in.

"Arr," said Mr. Fleecebumpkin. "Reverend Crippen Mobey, is it then? Odd, that. Time was, there was Mobeys all over Meems 'ere. Till they got run out."

"Run out?" I said.

"Them what wasn't 'anged. No, I take that back. Old Righteous Mobey were burnt for witchcraft, weren't she, Mother?"

"Arr," said Mother Fleecebumpkin.

"Arr. That's it, then. Righteous were burnt, and 'twas Modesty Mobey were 'anged for the murther of 'er 'usband Temperance Mobey by dosing 'is whisky with wolfbane. Old Sawney Mobey were 'anged for some people 'e cut up and et. Uncle Pleasant Mobey 'anged for poaching of ducks from t'manor's rights of warren on t'River Smarm. Old Deliverance Mobey 'anged for begetting a passel of other Mobeys on 'is own dotters. That were enough Mobeys for Meems. T'whole of they clan were sentenced to transportation. To they penal colonies — Botany Bay or summat. Long afore our time, o'course." He regarded me with narrowed eyes. "And so, reverend zur, ye be a Mobey ...?"

"*Si*," I said, instantly affecting an Oblivian accent. "*Es un* coincidence *curioso*." I had intended to inquire whether there were any bronze plaques about the village commemorating the one-time homesites of notable Mobeys. Instead, I gave the Fleecebumpkins to understand that I was a Protestant refugee from religious persecution in Oblivia and that my surname had been but recently Anglicized from the Spanish *Moron*.

This evidently allayed any suspicions. I was conducted upstairs to my room, a damp, musty-smelling sort of monk's cell directly under the thatch, and was urged to make my ablutions with expedition, as supper was about to be laid, and I mustn't miss the speciality of the house. I complied, but took only a sketchy sponge bath, as the soap, towel and basin of scummed cold water all appeared to have been previously used — in 1937? — then hurried downstairs again to the dining room. I was the only diner in

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that drafty cavern where the drizzle beat against the lozenge-paned windows. I felt most conspicuous and uncomfortable, but I was by then hungry enough to eat the plate of mutton and Brussels sprouts set before me.

Afterward, I went through a door marked Publick Bar and observed that the pub was what kept the Meaching-on-Smarm Arms in business. There was quite a crowd of patrons at the bar, tables and dartboard, all speaking the local cleft-palate dialect, interspersed with arrs. They were mostly labourer-looking types, wearing wide-brimmed rustic hats, shapeless smocks and trousers tied with string below the knee. I knew, of course, from reading Thomas Hardy, that I would find the peasants thus attired, but not Hardy nor anyone else has ever explained the trouser strings. The entire company fell silent as I entered, and moodily tugged their forelocks at me.

"Eftsoons!" I called out. I don't know what that signifies, either, but I figured a cheery greeting would demonstrate that I had the true Merrie Olde spirit. "Drinks for the house, landlord!"

Landlord Fleecebumpkin grinned greedily as he lavishly dispensed glasses, flagons and tankards of a dark-brown, foamy-topped beverage, which were seized by eager hands. He eventually came to where I leaned on the end of the bar and said, "Respecting yer cloth, zur — ginger beer?"

"No, no," I said, but not severely. "I never partake of such."

"Arr," said he, his eyes lighting. "The right sort o' parson. Whitebread's, per'aps?"

Those sounded innocuous — the local tea-biscuits, I assumed — even if they might look out of place in here. Imagine my surprise, Reverend Flifford, when Whitebread's turned out to be a liquid in a glass, even darker and thicker than the other patrons' drinks, and yeastier-tasting than any bread of my experience. I raised my glass and called for a toast, but the others had already (rather impolitely) drained their mugs, which had to be filled again.

"Confusion," I cried, "to false friends and hard masters!"

"Arr," they all growled, drained their flagons again and presented them to Fleecebumpkin for refilling.

After that quaff, I felt quite light-headed and uninhibited enough to try striking up a conversation with the whiskered old gaffer beside me at the bar.

"Baccy, gaffer?" I said, and proffered the pouch from which I had just filled the long clay churchwarden pipe I had previously purchased (after a deal of searching

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among their back rooms) at Dunhill's in Bond Street.

"Arr," the gaffer said disdainfully. He rummaged in a pocket of his smock, took out and lit up a long filter-tipped du Maurier, and turned his back on me. Rattled by the rebuff, I unthinkingly took a puff at my churchwarden. No smoker myself, I had procured it merely to appear a true Merrie Olde Englishman. When I had ceased coughing, choking and strangling — and in my spasm had dropped and shattered the clay pipe — I tried again for conversation, with the wiskered old gaffer at my other elbow.

"That's quite a towering black crag you've got out there," I said, nodding in the direction of the towering black crag. The nod made me slightly giddy.

"Arr," said the gaffer. "Meems's oanly claim to fame, that. Ravenspeak, 'tis called. 'Ighest eminence on Nevermoor."

"Quite a dishtinction," I said indistinctly. My tongue seemed to be thickening. I never should have puffed on that pipe. I took a hearty gulp of my liquid bread to wash away the tobacco taste.

"Thankee, guvnor, doan't mind'f I do," said the gaffer, shoving his empty tankard across the bar for a refill. "O'course, Ravenspeak do be 'aunted. Like all this bloody county. Us doan't never go out on Nevermoor b'night. Us doan't *never* go oop Ravenspeak."

"'Aunted," I repeated stupidly. "I mean haunted. By who?"

"Us doan't know by *oo*, us oanly knows by *wot*. T'Old Bugger, us calls en. And t'name Old Bugger'll tell ye right enough wot kind of 'orrid evil yon spook commits." (The name told me nothing of the kind, but I was admittedly muzzy.) "Oh, 'tis crool. Young Cranbury Jukes clumb oop Ravenspeak not long agone, on a dare. 'E coom down, but 'e never bin right in t'head agin. Pixie-mazed 'e be, and a burthen on the county ever since, is Jukes. Not to mention us 'aving to keep our ewe-sheeps locked up agin en."

This was Greek to me. I shook my bleary head. Then a new voice said loudly, "Ruint me trade as well, t'Old Bugger."

It was landlord Fleecebumpkin. He shoved the hotel register in front of me and pointed at the 1937 entry. With difficulty I focused and made out the signature: Sir Francis Drakula. "Raven 'aired gent 'e was, when 'e went oop Ravenspeak. Snow-white 'aired 'e was when 'e coom down. The doctors carried en away in a strait-weskit. Arr, 'twas crool!"

"Might be ye noticed, lad," said the gaffer, "yon ruint castle atop o'Ravenspeak. 'Tis there t'Old Bugger lurks. They say 'twas built

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by Grandsire Methuselah Mobey, 'im wot were patriarch of all the dommed Mobey clan wot used to infest these parts. Well, fugm. They Mobeys do be all long gone, but they'm left us an 'orrible legacy in t'Old Bugger. Thankee, doan't mind'f I do. But say, guv, I can't thankee proper, seeing's ye've never spoke yer name."

I must have told him, for I have a dim recollection of being punched forcefully upon my nose ... then a confused babble of shouts and "Dom ye, Gaffer Toby, me first tenant in forty year!" ... then of someone replacing my bent spectacles upon my bent nose ... then of being helped up the stairs to my room. The hearth there had been laid with a fire of which Ebenezer Scrooge would have approved, and if the mice-rustled roof thatch had not shed copiously upon me during the night, I should have frozen to death in my bed.

I was awakened by the everlasting drizzle of rain seeming to drill like icepicks into my throbbing skull and by the entrance of Mother Fleecebumpkin bringing my breakfast. This consisted of a cup of weak and tepid tea and a cold thing called toast. Arr. Very hard to eat, with my nose. I mean with my nose so painful that the movement of chewing was agony.

I dressed and left my moist and musty room for some fresher drizzle outdoors. On the High Street (the only street) of Meaching-on-Smarm I met, one after another, all the same rustics I had seen in the Publick Bar last night and wondered to myself: when do they work, and at what? The men all tugged their forelocks at me, but not at all respectfully. It appeared that, despite my shameful and weakling denial of my heritage, the accursed name of Mobey had marked me like Cain. I glanced up at the crag of Ravenspeak and the snaggle-toothed ruin thereon. How could I ever again face my Virginia relatives after what I had learned?

I recalled my blue-haired dowager grandmother, at the annual conventions of the Daughters of James-towne Colonie, every year enlarging on the endowments and exploits of our forebears — Methuselah, Temperance, Deliverance, and the rest — though not quite in the same vein as I had heard last night. She had pictured our progenitors as paragons of virture and *vis viva*, beloved and revered by all Transylvanshire. Those later Mobeys who set sail for the New World, she said, had done so only to enlighten the still rough and rude colonies with their shining examples of benevolence, wisdom, philanthropy and court etiquette. But now it was hard for me to envision ancestor Sawney selecting just the proper fork for his feral

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feast. And what could those bygone Mobeys have left behind them to haunt this land? The Old Bugger, whatever that was. A thought struck me. Might it be that I, the Mobey who *had* come home again, had been divinely and all unwittingly dispatched to lay that ghost?

I came out of my gloomy reverie to find myself at the gate of the village vicarage. Church of England, of course; next thing to Papistry. But, for all that, the vicar would be a brother of the cloth, and possibly a source of sage advice.

"Aye, lad!" he boomed. "A rare privilege: to greet a colleague from across the pond. No dog collar, I see. But no matter, no matter. All one in the end. Sherry or claret? Eh? Too early? Oh, surely the sun's over the yardarm somewhere in the Empire."

Parson Wakefield was a Pickwickian vicar, bulbously stout and rubicund of complexion, with his gaiters misbuttoned and dried stains of wine and gravy on his black bib.

"Missionary, you say? Well, even if you're touting one of your colonies' snake-fondling sects, you might make converts here. Heaven knows I've had little success in making Meems toe the Anglican line in the thirty-two years I've held this living. You ask of the people hereabouts? Egad. Even in my young days as a regimental chaplain in the Punjab, I've never met a more backward bunch of blisters. What do they do for employment? Nothing, my boy. The Peat Plant is the only industry in these parts and, with the energy crisis, it ought to be booming. But there's an energy crisis among these Meems blighters as well. The heathen laggards have some superstition that forbids their going out to the peat bogs on Nevermoor after dark. So, when the Peat Plant tried to put on a night shift, the whole labour force struck. That was six years ago, and they've been out ever since. Meems has the dubious distinction of being Britain's only community with one hundred percent unemployment."

"I've heard mention of the manor," I said. "Shouldn't the lord of the manor be doing something in the way of relief? *Noblesse oblige* and all that?"

"Ah, yes, the lord of the manor. Former Undersecretary for Air and RAF Air Commodore (Ret.) Lord John God. Well, he *has* obliged, to the extent of no longer taxing the fief down to the fluff in its pockets. It seems that Lord God made some sort of deal, *infra dignitatem*, with your colonies' Lockheed Company. Now he spends all his time on his new luxury yawl, cruising about the Norfolk Broads."

"Arrogant aristocrat!" I cried. "Spending his ill-gotten gains on Norfolk Chippies, when his own

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yeomen and serfs are —"

"Ahem. The broads of Norfolk are lakes and fens. For all his faults, Lord God is not a woman-chaser."

I hardly heard him. "So I was right," I said under my breath. "I, Crispin Mobey, have been divinely and all unwittingly sent here to lay the specter of the Smarm. If I can stamp out that superstition, all these honest sons of toil can go back to their honourable occupation of peat planting or whatever it is."

"I should counsel against meddling," Vicar Wakefield said dryly. "The Labour Party pays every striker a substantial dole. It beats working for a living. Meems is Labour's staunchest constituency in the kingdom." Suddenly he gave a start that spilled a dollop of his wine. "Mobey! Did you say Mobey? Egad, sir, are you ilk of that vile, degenerate, ignorant, inbred and impious family?"

"Have a care, sir," I said stiffly. "Impious we are not. We constitute the very navel of the Bible Belt."

"Egad, sir, I'd have expected any Mobey by now to have two heads. Or a Siamese twin attached. Or extraneous noses, at the very least."

"I, sir, am of the Virginia Mobeys," I said, standing up and standing proud. "I'll grant you, sir, that down in the Carolinas there is a cadet branch which —"

"You'll oblige me, sir, by taking your leave at your earliest convenience. This house is old. A Heaven-sent thunderbolt, however well-intentioned, could effect extensive damage."

I left, red-faced and seething, but determined now. I *would* climb Ravenspeak and beard the beastly Bugger. I *would* expunge the age-old blot from the Mobey escutcheon.

Oh, I will admit, Reverend Shepherd-in-Chief, that the prospect did not exactly fill me with glee. I had no hankering for my mouse-coloured hair to turn snow-white or for my keen mind to be pixie-mazed. Indeed, I timorously deferred my venture for some days. But the morbific monotony of eating the Meaching-on-Smarm Arms' indigestible mutton and Brussels sprouts, and the way the patrons of the Publick Bar downed their pints and departed every time I entered, and the way the geese on the village green hissed at me every time I sat there in the drizzle, and the way the Fleecebumpkins began leaving little leaflets around my room, extolling the tourist attractions of Birmingham and Belfast — from these things I eventually inferred that if I did not soon make my move I should be moved willy-nilly.

On the night I went, the cease-

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less drizzle ceased, to allow for a full-blown storm of blinding lightning, deafening thunder, breath-taking winds and a drenching downpour that soon had me sodden to the bone. The crag would not have been a difficult climb, but for the streaming water that extinguished my lanthorn and made the cliff ledges slick as glass. At length, fatigued of body and bleeding of fingertips, I achieved the summit and ran gratefully for the shelter of Methuselah's dinky castle. The ruins were almost entirely in ruins — a tumble of massive, slimy, lichen-covered boulders — but, somewhat eerily, one room was quite intact, weathertight and even furnished with a bed, upon which I toppled soggily, to seep and gasp for a while. Though the bed smelled of grave-mould and was sheeting with what might have been old shrouds, it was considerably more comfortable than my penitential cot at the Arms.

My breathing eventually came with less of a rasp, so that I could again hear the wuthering winds and thunder and drumming of the rain. I heard something else: a low and menacing chuckle. My hair rose on my head (and I wondered if it were blanching), as my eyes adjusted to the darkness and I perceived a dim, spectral, greenish-white glow at the foot of the bed. Loudly I intoned: "In the name of our Saviour, aroint thee, evil being —"

"Oh, poot," said the evil being.

I squinted into the darkness. My hair subsided into place, as I made out the glow to be one of those novelty-shop neckties which fluoresce the words "Will You Kiss Me In The Dark, Baby?" So the evil being, I thought, is no more than a clod-witted village prankster. To make it plain that I was uncowed, I declaimed: "I, the Reverend Crispin Mobey, bid thee begone!"

"Mobey? Dash it all!" said the voice, with disappointment. "I do draw the line at incest."

The lightning flared just then through the room's slit windows, and I had a brief glimpse of a tall, thin, willowy gentleman, no one I had yet encountered in these parts.

"I say," he said rather wistfully, from the ensuing darkness. "Are you really of the Mobey line?"

"A direct descendant of patriarch Methuselah. Are you really, er, supernatural?"

"Yes. And you are my godson, dem the luck," he sighed. I goggled at his nasty necktie in the darkness. "Ah, well," he said, "let there be light." At once the room lit up as if the rock walls themselves were fluorescing. In the light, his necktie was merely of vulgar Carnaby Street pattern. Except for that, he was impeccably attired in the City mode, complete to bowler hat and

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furled umbrella. Wings of gray hair over his ears, a narrow and aristocratic face, a neat waxed Anthony Eden mustache.

"You," I blurted, "are the Old Bugger?"

He winced and mumbled, "Name of Andrew Merrygrig, ekshly." He added sternly, "I'll thank you to address your godfather with some respect. You may call me Dad."

"How can a ghost be my —?"

"I am not a ghost. I am your fairy godfather. Surely you have read of such. It was a commission laid upon me in an age when people had the true belief."

"By Methuselah Mobey?" I asked, bewildered.

"No. By his demmed dragon of a wife. Your great-umpty-grandmother Twilight Zoe. The old witch caught me in an, er, indescretion and blackmailed me by threatening to Tell All that demmed straight-arrow King Oberon. Ever since, I have been fairy godfather to every newborn Mobey. You are the first in three hundred years to claim that benefice, but I cannot shirk my duty. I am bound to grant your every wish."

Instantly my mind teemed with wishes. A world converted to So-Prim Christianity. Peace on earth. Good will toward men. A thriving peat industry for Meaching-on-Smarm. I must confess, Reverend Flifford, that in that moment I forgot all the sacred precepts of our religion. Our renunciation of all superstitions, for instance, except those pertaining to drinking, smoking, dancing, flirting, profanity, Sunday movies, and other such libidinous pursuits. For this moment, I was swept back into pagan superstition, unchristian mysticism and fairy-tale yearnings.

"Do you seriously mean, Dad Andrew," I said slowly, "that if I wished for a kingdom and Princess Charming ...?"

"Done and done," he said, smiling, "and I applaud your tastes." He clapped his hands.

In a wink he and Methuselah Mobey's gothic ruin were gone. I was seated on an imposing throne in a splendidly royal hall hung with tapestries and heraldic banners, and I could hardly sit up straight, for the weight of my golden crown, bejeweled scepter and ermine robes. Then a great jade door opened at the far end of the hall. Down the length of the gleaming albaster floor came frisking half a dozen lovely and lithe young boys, all wearing gold coronets and livery of lavender velvet. They surrounded me and, giggling like Tinkerbells, began to undress me.

"No! No!" I shouted, struggling mightily against the caresses they

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insinuated into this activity. "No, you've got it wrong! This isn't what I meant!"

"Oh," said Godfather Merrygrig, sounding hurt. "I thought you said Princess Charming." I was back in the old rock room, trembling and panting from exertion. I glared at him. A terrible suspicion was beginning to dawn on me.

I might say right here, reverend sir, that what is called luck has eluded me all my life. When I was a mere lad, I carried everywhere a rabbit's foot, or what I had bought for a rabbit's foot. It turned out to be something called The Monkey's Paw, and dreadful things befell me. When I was first ordained as a SoPrim minister, I went immediately to an ecclesiastical costumery and bought myself a suit of clerical black, an eminently practical suit intended for years of wear: a two-pants suit. Before I got back to the seminary dorm, some passing lout with a cigar had burned a large hole in the jacket of it. Now — *now* I had been blessed with a fairy godfather.

"I begin to suspect," I said, "why Sir Francis Drakula's hair turned white, and how Cranbury Jukes got pixie-mazed. Well, this must stop. For my next wish, Dad, I wish that you, er, abandon these wicked proclivities."

He gave me a thin smile of condescension. "Not only a banal wish, it's ungrantable. Changing my own nature is beyond my powers."

I thought this over and tried to find a bright side. "Well," I murmured, "I suppose you can't do too much harm, now that no one climbs Ravenspeak any more."

"Oh, I'm not exactly cloistered, dear fellow. I can flit about invisibly at times — to visit a werewolf friend in Hants, an ogre in Oxford — and one does have one's friends in the mortal world, you know. There's young Lance Daydream down in Meems. And Lord God, when he's accessible."

"Lord God? Good Lord!"

"The local one, I mean, of course."

I brooded some more. If Andrew Merrygrip could not change his own nature, perhaps someone else could. Not I, I knew. But Southern Primitive Protestantism prides itself on not, like so many other churches, refusing to concede the healing efficacy of modern scientific aids. Lydia Pinkham's. Laying-on of hands. Laetrile. I decided science was our best hope.

"I wish, Dad, that you whisk me *and* accompany me to London. This instant. I will send a cheque to landlord Fleecebumpkin from there, and a messenger to collect my valise."

"This instant?" asked my godfather, raising his eyebrows. "You would appear in London in your

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femoral habiliments?"

"Eh?"

"In your breeks, man?"

"Eh?"

"Dash it all! *In your underpants?*"

"Oh." I had forgotten having been undressed by the playful princes. I began to climb back into my soggy garments, but Dad gestured, and there was my valise full of drier gear.

"No need to trouble about Fleecebumpkin," he said lightly. "Of course, defrauding an innkeeper is a heinous offense, but he will expect it of a Mobey. Ready, my poppet?"

He gave his umbrella a jaunty twirl and, on the instant, we stood amid the flitter and glitter of Piccadilly. A passing gentleman jumped — said "Ow!" — turned, gave me a vicious look and hit me on the head with his cane. I couldn't figure that out, but took no time to fret about it. I said, "Come, Dad. We must find a telephone box."

As we circled the Circus in the drizzle, one man after another either said "Ow!" or made a face at me or called me a vulgar name or took a swat at me. "What is this?" I finally complained. "Has all London taken leave of its senses?"

"Demmed provincials have never been to Italy," said my godfather. "Unaccustomed to those little tweaks which signify admiration."

"You mean you're *pinching* these gentlemen?" I cried in horror. "But why are they belabouring me?"

"At this moment, I am invisible to all but you, dear boy." And at that moment, a passing young lady went "Eek!" and batted me with her handbag. At my glower, Merrygrig shrugged and said, "I assumed, my boy, that you prefer to be recognized as straight."

"I prefer not to be hit any more!" I said angrily. "I prefer that you desist from this mischief. I prefer that you become visible and behave. That's a *wish*, Dad!"

He shrugged again and accompanied me in pouting silence until, with no more incidents en route, we found a telephone kiosk. I went in and, with my back to him, consulted a directory. I looked up the listing of psychiatrists and ran my finger down the lines until I came to a good, solid, stolid Scottish name. There could certainly be no nonsense about a doctor yclept Fergus Calligarry, M.D., F.R.C.P., but would he see a patient at this late hour?

I need not have wondered. When I emerged from the booth, Godfather Merrygrig had been engulfed by a crowd in violent commotion, the people all shouting, "Shame! Shame!" Before I could intervene, a burly bobby elbowed

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his way into the mob, bellowing, "Nar then, nar then, wot's orl this?" A Black Maria drew up shortly, and I faded away from the imbroglio. My errant godfather had to stay in custody (and I in the YMCA) until I could gain an interview with Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard's vice squad the next morning.

"The Piccadilly Pincher, eh?" he said. "What do you want with that one? You his ponce?"

"No," I said, "whatever that is. I'm a distant relative. I have already made an appointment for him to receive counseling from a psychiatrist."

"On that condition," said the inspector, "we'll let him off with a warning. This time."

"Can't thank you enough, dear boy," said Dad Andrew, as I led him none too gently out of the Yard, onto Victoria Street and into a cab. "My invisibility is a whimsical thing. I can bid it come, but sometimes it goes away of its own, and at the most embarrassing —" He saw the brass nameplate on the Harley Street door and tugged loose of my grip. "Oh, I say, lad!"

"No arguments now. It's the only reason you were remanded in my custody. This is another wish. You can't refuse." Whimpering slightly, he let me propel him inside.

"Mobey? Um, yes," said the trim receptionist. "Doctor Calligarry is expecting you. Fifty pounds retainer in advance, please." Och, aye, I thought: a true Scot.

I made a silent wish, felt my wallet suddenly bulge in my pocket, and handed over the fee. She indicated a leather-paneled door and, Merrygrig in tow, I entered the book-lined sanctum and held my godfather firmly before the desk. The psychiatrist looked up from under bristling antennae eyebrows and got right to the point.

"You comblain uff a proplem in the family, Herr Mopey."

"Yes, sir, it's my fairy godfather," and I jiggled him by the arm to invite the doctor's inspection. But the bristling eyebrows — rather raised now — bristled only at me, while Dr. Calligarry unobtrusively dropped one hand below desk level. A pair of tape reels recessed into a bookcase began silently to turn. I continued, "He's been godfather to us Mobeys for more than three centuries. But the trouble is that he's not only a fairy godfather, he's a godfather fairy, if you see what I mean."

The doctor's eyes darted shiftily around the room, as if to see what I meant. "Zose are nodt exactly technical terms, younk Mopey. Couldt you pe more shpecific?"

"Surely you have only to look at him," I said, a trifle impatiently. "The willowy gestures and all." I

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imitated a few of the willowy gestures. Dr. Calligarry reached under his desktop to push buttons again. "His name is Andrew Merrygrig, but he's known all over Nevermoor as the Old Bugger. Me, I call him Dad, because he demands respect. Dad doesn't consider his behaviour a problem, but I do. It's already cost me a session at New Scotland Yard, being mistaken for a ponce, whatever that is. I say the man needs help."

"Help, *ja* ..." said the doctor, distractedly. "If you vill calm yourself, Her Mopey, und sit down, I vill yust ring up the Yard und inqvire vot sort uff record —"

"Shouldn't you be asking *him?*" I demanded, jiggling Andrew's arm again. "*Examining* him?"

"*Ach, ja*, eggzomination ..." said the psychiatrist, somewhat frantically. "All in accord mit procedure. Und be not alarmed, younk Herr. Of zis *Angst* ve vill rid you, neffer fear. *Nicht wahr*, boys?"

Two beefy men in white jackets were gripping me by either elbow. A sudden realization hit me. I snarled at Godfather Merrygrig, "Have you been invisible all this time, Dad?" He nodded and simpered, while the doctor and his two musclemen exchanged glances. "There!" I said triumphantly to Dr. Calligarry. "That explains everything, doesn't it? Proves me right, right? Right!"

"Right," said the psychiatrist crisply to the men in white. "Maudsley Hospital, room vun-oh-vun." He flicked his intercom. "Fraulein Strangeways, contact effery vun uff my colleagues uff the Royal College and haff them meet me for ein special conzultation at ...."

Room 101 was padded. I will skim only briefly over the next hours. When I wasn't bound in a strait-weskit and being jabbed with needles of Sodium Pentothal, I was being encouraged to squeeze round pegs into square holes or being bombarded with questions by a whole bevy of doctors with Van Dyke beards and Viennese accents. I could answer their weird questions only with fearful questions of my own: "Is my hair turning white like Sir Francis Drakula's? Am I going pixie-mazed like Cranbury Jukes?" — which stunned several of them into lapsing from Viennese to Cockney accents. The number of questioners was eventually swelled by a horde of arriving reporters and photographers (from the medical journals, I supposed), among whom there was much excited talk about my "unheard-of case" ... "baffle even Krafft-Ebing" ... "milestone in psychiatric history ..."

I might still be mouldering in Maudsley, except that something occurred to *prove* my insistently repeated and persistently unbeliev-

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ed story. Godfather Andrew Merrygrig was arrested most conspicuously, in Threadneedle Street, for brazenly attempting to importune a derelict but notoriously heterosexual former cabinet minister. Since Dad Andrew had been picked up this time by the City police instead of the Metropolitan, he was lodged for a hearing in the Guildhall, to which the journalists instantly repaired. So did Dr. Calligarry, but not until he had, with perfunctory apologies, unwired me from the polygraph and turned off the dazzling interrogation lights. He even returned to me ("as a finder's fee," he said) ten percent of the retainer I had paid his Miss Strangeways. Then he dashed off for the Guildhall to grill my godfather. I followed more slowly, since I was still sore from the needles and cramped from the straps.

It was a good while before I could claim, as next of kin, a private interview with Godfather Merrygrig. And, when we were alone together in his detention room, I could only tell him, "I don't know what I can do about getting you released, Dad. This is the second time you've been taken in charge in twenty-four hours."

"I can resist anything but temptation," he grinned, seeming strangely exhilarated. "Don't bother your little head, dear godson. As soon as I've built up another voltage of invisibility, I'll be wafting out of here under the very noses of these gaolers (jailers). And not alone. Did you *see* them?"

"See who?"

"Downstairs here in the Guildhall. Those two magnificent figures. Gog and Magog. The ancient protector giants of Londinium."

"What?"

"You don't know the legend? They were the only two survivors of a race of giants overthrown by an olden English hero. A hero named Brute, isn't that delicious? Brute brought Gog and Magog here in chains, to serve as gatekeepers when the king's palace stood on this site. They've been here ever since."

"You mean those two big ugly wooden statues?"

"Statues only by day, for the delectation of ignorant rubbernecks. Come night, they come alive. Stalwarts they are, fourteen feet tall. Ah, this beats any ogre in Oxford!"

"What exactly are you hinting at, Dad?"

"I've told no one — not that prying Doctor Calligarry — no one but you, dear boy. The fact is ..." he said, his eyes demurely downcast, "we're in love."

"Who are?"

"All three of us. We'll escape together. To the Forest of Arden. And, in true fairy-tale style, Gog,

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Magog and Merrygrig will live happily ever after."

That was the last I ever saw (or hope to see) of my fairy godfather. When the aged warder unlocked the detention room door and let me out into the hall, I was approached by a young man whom I vaguely recalled having seen at Maudsley Hospital.

He said, "Curious case, this, what?"

"It gets curiouser and curiouser," I said dejectedly. "Now the old fool is enamoured of Gog and Magog."

"How's that?" said the young man, his eyes lighting with what I took to be sympathy. "Perhaps, Reverend Mobey, you could tell me the whole story right from the beginning. I may be able to influence some, er, leniency when Mister Merrygrig comes up before the alderman."

So I told it to him, just as I've told it to you, here, Reverend Flifford. When I had done, and he had finished scribbling in his notebook and had dashed away muttering something about "deadline," the aged warder spoke up:

"Arr. Don't know as you were wise to unboozum yerself, lad. That yobbo were Scoop Scoggins, ace reporter of the *Daily Sketch*, a scandalmongering tabloid with no scruples whatsoever."

How right he was. When I sallied forth from the YMCA next morning, the newsboys were screaming and flaunting placards on every corner:

GOG AND MAGOG VANISH FROM GUILDHALL!

HISTORIC RELICS BAGGED BY OLD BUGGER!

PERVERSE LOVE TRIANGLE HINTED!

The newspapers' stories were even more damningly explicit. Under UNSAVOURY CASE OF THE *REALLY* FAIRY GODFATHER! — was detailed the entire story I had innocently recounted to that sympathetic young man. There were full-face and profile photographs of myself and photographs of the statue-denuded Guildhall. Sidebar stories told how the City and Metropolitan police, Scotland Yard's C.I.D. and the intelligence agency MI-5 were all patrolling every traditional escape route and hideout of the most desperate sort of criminal fugitives: Heathrow, the highways, the railroad stations, the YMCA. I could not even return to my room without certainty of apprehension and still more scandal.

At that moment I would have given anything to find a SoPrim mission branch in London, but of course there isn't one. So I threw myself on the mercy of the Church of England. I found a backstreet church and gave myself up to the

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vicar, one Reverend Goodbody, who was considerably more compassionate than Vicar Wakefield had been. At least Vicar Goodbody had no ingrained animus toward the name of Mobey, since he'd never heard of it before now. He listened to my pathetic tale of woe, patted me on the shoulder, then called in his curate, one of those Mod young clergymen of the type who advocate rock religious services nowadays.

Curate Rollingstoun entered at once into the spirit of the "caper," as he called it. He procured for me a shabby hippie costume, exchanged my horn-rimmed spectacles for granny glasses, gummed onto my cheeks and chin a disreputable crepe beard, then smuggled me — as Oscar Wild — aboard the Newhaven ferry for Dieppe. Just before I boarded, the good curate, smiling, trying to cheer me up, said, "Don we now our gay apparel," and bought me a green carnation for my buttonhole.

Well, I reflected, as the ferry pitched and plunged through the Channel chop, from now on Godfather Merrygrig would be exercising his perilous passions on his wooden effigies of Gog and Magog — and in Arden Forest, wherever that was. He would no longer be making life hideous for Transylvanshire. The men of Meems could return to their Nevermoor peat bogs. Perhaps even Lord God would attend more assiduously to his manorial duties. My ancestral village could rise again from squalour to its rightful splendour as Birthplace of the Mobeys. Yes, I had, however fortuitously, finally lifted the age-old curse. Could I really bewail my own disgrace, the figurative stain on my cloth and my reputation, if I had accomplished that great good deed?

I so succeeded in emerging from my depression that, on arrival in Dieppe, I decided to celebrate by treating myself to a taste of the famous French *haute cuisine*. I found an elegant restaurant in the Avenue George Sank and ordered the most exotic-sounding dish on the carte: *Gigot aux choux de Bruxelles*. It turned out to be mutton and Brussels sprouts.

I do trust, Reverend Shepherd-in-Chief, that your money order is already winging its way toward me. My only hope of complete redemption in the eyes of the world is to return to the enfolding arms of my church and to forge ever onward and upward in other missionary endeavours. I am eager — nay, itching — to begin again. For this awful beard continues to itch me intolerably.

Your penitent prodigal,
Crispin Mobey

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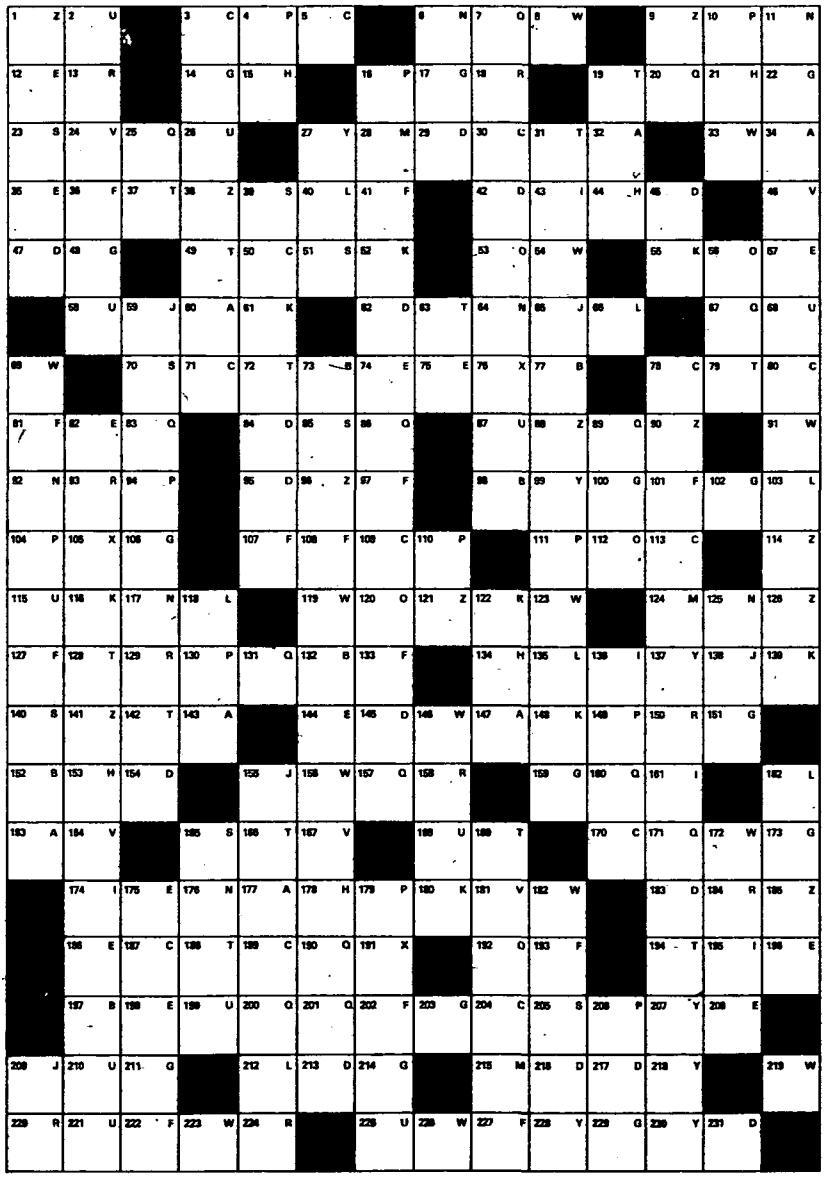

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Acrostic Puzzle

by Rob Masters and Regino Hugo

This puzzle contains a quotation from a work of science fiction. First, guess as many of the clues as you can and write the word or words in the numbered blanks in the puzzle. (The end of a line in the diagram doesn't mean the end of a word.) If you have answered the clues correctly, you will see words forming in the puzzle blocks. Fill in the missing letters and put them in the numbered spaces opposite the clues. That will help you guess those words and therefore get more of the puzzle, and so on. The first letters of the correctly answered clues will spell out the name of the author and the title of the work from which the quotation is taken.

A. Secret code in Camp Concentration (Disch)

147 177 34 163 32 60 143

B. What Aladdin did to his lamp

98 73 197 152 132 77

C. Van Vogt story (three words)

170 71 113 3 189 50 30 109 187 5 204

80 78

D. Questions that are more important to Asimov than to Ballard (four words)

45 29 42 62 213 183 154 84 95 216 145

217 47 231

E. Author of THE DISPOSSESSED (first and last names)

198 35 74 175 196 75 82 57 208 144 186

12

F. What Raffles (F&SF, Sept. '75) did for a living (three words)

108 202 227 81 222 97 101 193 107 41 36

127 133

G. Halberd: a ___ ___ ___ weapon

100 22 211 102 17 106 173 159 14 214 229

203 48 151

H. Valve that stops flow to an engine

134 153 44 21 178 15

I. One of the crops of Shayol (Cordwainer Smith)

195 43 136 174 161

J. To celebrate the bicentennial on Alpha Centauri, we'd need ___ ___ drive

59 65 209 155 138

K. 1901 Nobel Prize winner for physics

148 116 139 52 55 180 61 122

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L. How Doc Savage's muscles look
118 40 135 162 212 103 66

M. Tolkienian being
28 215 124

N. Lovecraftian mythos
117 6 125 11 176 92 64

O. What Santa cried as he machine-gunned the enemy (Ellison)
56 192 112 120 7 53

P. What Eli, Ned, Oliver and Timothy sought (Silverberg)
179 110 149 10 104 16 4 130 206 111 94

Q. A tale of dreams that change the world (LeGuin; three words)
200 157 67 171 83 86 201 20 190 160 131
89 25

R. A variable determined by another variable
13 93 220 129 184 224 150 18 158

S. Inventors of carburization process for steel-making
85 39 70 205 51 140 165 23

T. Creator of Odd John (first and last names)
63 142 37 169 128 19 194 49 31 79 188
72 166

U. Frequent sf locale (two words)
168 2 115 68 221 87 210 225 199 26 58

V. THE _____ BIRD, by Harlan Ellison
167 164 24 46 181

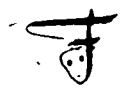
W. Optional equipment for sword and sorcery (three words)
33 146 8 172 182 156 223 69 123 219 91
226 54 119

X. THE _____ OF ETERNITY, by Asimov
105 76 191

Y. "They break up the monotony of the male chest" (GLORY ROAD)
207 228 27 137 230 99 218

Z. Frank Herbert sequel (two words)
185 121 90 141 38 126 9 114 1 96 88

Answer will appear in the October issue.



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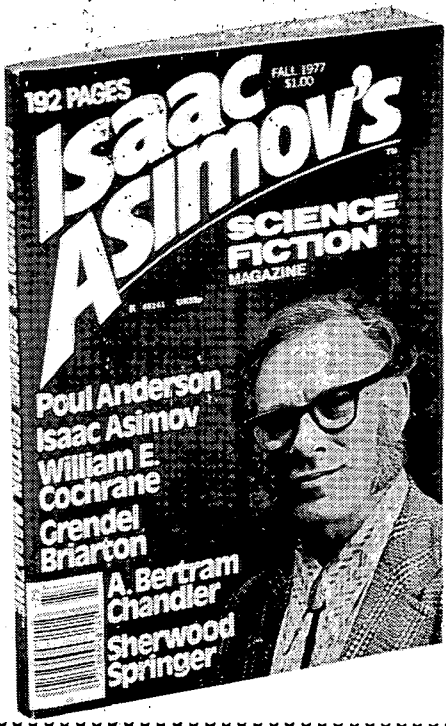

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